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"You best believe I'm all about the Shrocs"

Mark Brooks, Marco Vittur

EMPIRE

WELCOME

"THERE WAS AN IDEA," said Nick Fury back in 2012. "To bring together a group of remarkable people, to see if they could become something more." That idea, aka the Avengers, turned out pretty darn well. Billions of dollars grossed, endless screaming civilians saved, portals opened to rapturous audience applause, you know the score.

Thirteen years later, Marvel is about to unveil the results of another idea: the Thunderbolts. Except this time, the heroes are a little bit shabbier, a little more chaotic, and are maybe not even heroes at all. Instead of an Iron Man, in David Harbour's Red Guardian they have a man whose clothes need an iron. Instead of a Hulk, they have a Bob (Lewis Pullman's mysterious tag-along). And instead of a Black Widow — well, actually they do have one of those, but Florence Pugh's Yelena is plenty more ruthless than the model we're used to. Will this band of seven misfits, once brought together, become something more? Head to page 48 for our cover story and some answers, with Chris Hewitt (the closest thing *Empire* has to a Nick Fury) reporting from the Atlanta set and beyond.

Elsewhere in this issue we are excited to bring you the first word anywhere on Edgar Wright's upcoming Stephen King adaptation, *The Running Man* (those who remember the nods to *The Shining* and *Misery* in *Spaced* may have seen this day coming). James Cameron and his *Avatar: Fire And Ash* co-writers explain the art of typing scenes that begin with "EXT. PANDORA". And we visit more sets — *Black Mirror* in Surrey, *The Last Of Us* Season 2 in Vancouver, *HAVOC* in Cardiff —

to witness scenes that need to be read to be believed. Only one of them involved a feral beast with fungal tendrils, which to be honest is an improvement on our average week in the office.

In much sadder news, just as we were heading to press the news of Gene Hackman's death broke. We pay tribute to the legendary actor from page 16.

Enjoy the issue.

Nick

NICK DE SEMLYEN
EDITOR
@nickdesemlyen

SUBSCRIBER COVER

This month's exclusive subscriber cover by Mark Brooks
With a 20-year career as a professional illustrator and concept artist working for the likes of Disney, Marvel Comics, Warner Bros. and DC Comics, Mark was the perfect choice to design our special *Thunderbolts** cover.

TURN TO PAGE 8 TO LEARN HOW TO SIGN UP FOR AN EMPIRE SUBSCRIPTION

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DISPATCHES

TEAM EMPIRE ON A FEW OF OUR HIGH POINTS THIS MONTH

CHRIS HEWITT BECAME AN HONORARY THUNDERBOLT

"I went to Atlanta last year to visit the set of Marvel Studios' *Thunderbolts**, and got to hold the shield of Wyatt Russell's John Walker, which had been bent out of shape by… something. They called it the Taco Shield, which just made me hungry."

ROBERT ASCROFT PHOTOGRAPHED GIANCARLO ESPOSITO

"Collaborating with Giancarlo was a true privilege. His innate creativity and willingness to fully embody a character brought an electric energy to our shoot. What a remarkable day with an extraordinary force of talent."

BETH WEBB HOSTED OUR *EMPIRE* VIP SCREENING OF *FLOW*

"A cosy afternoon was spent in the company of director Gints Zilbalodis — and his brave on-screen feline — for our preview of his award-winning animation. Special kudos to the girl with the woolly cat hat for an excellent question!"

Robert Ascroft. Disney. Spinelines issue 438: Newsstand: "This is your day of reckoning, boy" is from *Chappie*. Subs: "When you get there, you will already be there" is from *Twin Peaks*

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COMMENT

LETTER OF THE MONTH

A MESSAGE FROM THE RED ROOM

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CHARLES JOHNSON, VIA EMAIL

It took us about two hours to figure out what was going on here. We had to ask the Log Lady for help. For your ingenious letter, Charles, have a Picturehouse membership on us. It will be delivered via a talking luminescent tree.

Picturehouse

Empire's star letter wins a Picturehouse Membership, valid for one year at all Picturehouse Cinemas across the UK, including the flagship Picturehouse Central in London's West End. The Membership comes pre-loaded with five free tickets, and gets you access to exclusive discounts on food, snacks and drinks. When you write to us, please include your full contact details so we can arrange delivery of your prize.

ON THE FIRST LOOK AT CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S *THE ODYSSEY*:
Another film about getting Matt Damon home. He really leans into his USP. Can't wait.
SARAH PRINCE

PEP FOR POM

Is there a finer actor's name than Pom Klementieff? Any mentions of Pom Klementieff, and I can't stop repeating the name Pom Klementieff. If marketers want to tell me about new Pom Klementieff films, I will tell everyone that Pom Klementieff is in a new movie starring Pom Klementieff. *Pom Klementieff.*

RYAN GASCOYNE, SHEFFIELD

We see your Pom Klementieff and raise you a Walton Goggins. Any advance on Walton Goggins?

Just subscribed to @empiremagazine.bsky.social and I felt weirdly emotional. Read so many copies and really thought about films via its pages when I was younger.
@100ONBOOKS.BSKY.SOCIAL

FUSE LIT

Can I just say, as someone obsessed with the *Mission* films, not only was your feature on *MI:8* ['Fasten Your Seatbelts', issue #438] superb, but Chris Hewitt has outdone himself with his anti-entity/Aunty Entity pun, and you should give him a paid vacation to the south of France.

JOSH HAIDER-SMITH, VIA EMAIL

As befits the current state of journalism, Chris will be rewarded for his efforts with a firm handshake.

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASKED:
WHAT BOLD NEW DIRECTION WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE THE JAMES BOND FRANCHISE TAKE?

MUPPET. BOND.
@DRFERNRIDDELL.BSKY.SOCIAL

A series of one-off films by big directors (Nolan, Tarantino) — don't worry about continuity.
@HARRISLEEHARRIS.BSKY.SOCIAL

Make a Bond movie where everyone else is real but James Bond is a CG character like Jar Jar Binks.
@CENTURY21SAVAGE.BSKY.SOCIAL

I'd like to see a retired Bond, opening the James Bond Clinic For Sexually Transmitted Diseases.
@DAMETOKILLFOR.BSKY.SOCIAL

Back in the Swinging '60s. Bond hunting Nazi billionaires.
@MSMEEEA.BSKY.SOCIAL

Bond vs Zombies!
@GAVINWELLS.BSKY.SOCIAL

WATCH OUT FOR THE NEXT QUESTION VIA OUR BLUESKY ACCOUNT: @EMPIREMAGAZINE.BSKY.SOCIAL

PREVIOUSLY, IN EMPIRE...

FLORENCE PUGH'S FIRST APPEARANCE MAY 2017

FLORENCE PUGH ADORNS the *Empire* cover this month. It was nearly a decade ago that we first recognised a future star and invited the then-21-year-old to a photoshoot for our new talent slot The Intro, just ahead of her breakout role in *Lady Macbeth*.

With no inkling of the Oscar nomination or blockbuster Marvel films yet to come, Pugh cited Kate Winslet and Natalie Portman as her acting heroes: "It's those women with on-screen oomph that you aspire to be like." (Pugh and Portman would later jointly present an award at the 2024 Golden Globes.) She also divulged her hobbies — including off-road motorbiking, and, erm, snails. "When I was younger, I had a snail shelter," she exclusively revealed. Look how far she's come!

Imago

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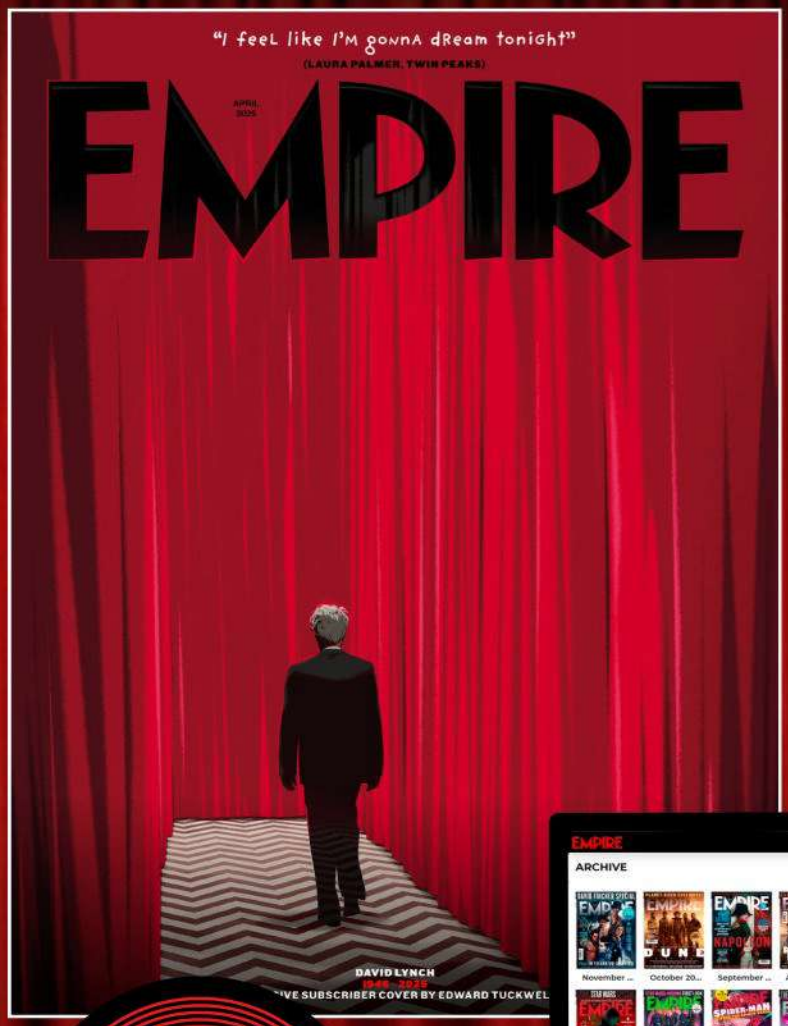

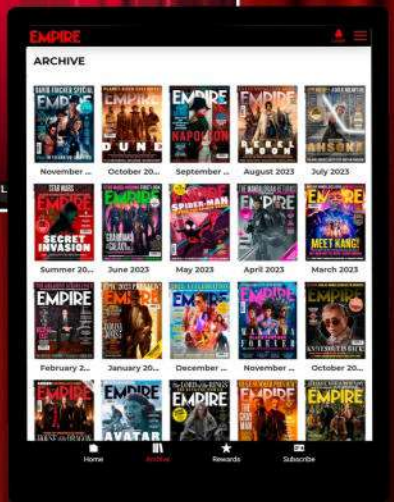

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first word

ALL THE ESSENTIAL INTEL, FROM HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND

MAY 2025 | EDITED BY BETH WEBB

Reliving a nightmare in real-time

ALEX GARLAND AND THE TEAM BEHIND WARFARE ON CAPTURING THE MINUTE-BY-MINUTE HORRORS OF CONFLICT

WORDS **KEVIN EG PERRY**

IN ALEX GARLAND'S *Civil War*, a journalistic road trip across a war-torn America climaxes with a military assault through the corridors of the White House. While creating the sequence, Garland sought the advice of former Navy SEAL Ray Mendoza, and after the pair hit it off, they began plotting whether they could use the same filmmaking techniques to take audiences inside a real-life battle. The result is *Warfare*, an intense 90-minute recreation of a harrowing firefight in Iraq in 2006 that Mendoza survived. Here, the co-directors reunite with star D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai (*Reservation Dogs*), who plays Mendoza, to discuss bringing a hyper-realistic depiction of modern warfare to the screen.

What was the inspiration for *Warfare*?

Alex Garland: I had an idea, and it didn't have to be a war film. I was interested in recreating something real as forensically as possible, and doing it in real-time. I said to Ray, "Do you have an example of combat where we could take an hour-and-a-half and try to represent it accurately and faithfully on film?" Ray actually had a story he'd wanted to do for a long time, so the two interests dovetailed.

Ray Mendoza: My initial motivator was [fellow Navy SEAL] Elliot. He suffered a traumatic brain injury in this incident, and flatlined a few times, and he just has no recollection [of the event]. It's frustrating for him. For all the guys who were there, this is a gift we've wanted to give him for a very long time.

Garland: As soon as Ray told me the story, I realised this wasn't something that would make sense for me to conventionally direct. What would be the point of actors coming up to me asking about motivation, when the guy who could answer was standing four feet away?

How did Elliot first react to the project?

Mendoza: He was super-excited. Just the fact that a movie was being made about what happened was exciting, and it also acts as a voice for him. It can be hard for veterans to talk about an experience. Now he can show this to his kids, who have questions all the time. If you don't remember, it's hard to explain.

D'Pharaoh, how did you approach not just playing a real person, but one who is also your director?

D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai: It was definitely [a] once-in-a-lifetime [experience]. There was a lot of pressure on everybody, especially the cast-members who had the people they were portraying there on set. I wanted to get Ray's story right, and do it justice. As soon as I saw the cast I realised this film would be different because of how young the actors were, me included. Often in military films you see adults, but a lot of times the people on the front lines are very young.

Garland: D'Pharaoh's point is exactly right: we cast at the ages of the real people. We had a very simple rule making this film, which is that we weren't allowed to invent anything.

Mendoza: That removes a lot of the pressure.

Murray Close, A24

Main: D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai plays real-life Navy SEAL — and *Warfare* co-director — Ray Mendoza. **Below, top to bottom:** Bonding times for the SEALs; Will Poulter also stars; Mendoza and co-director Alex Gardland on set; The platoon in action.

When the actor can talk to the person they're portraying, I don't have to invent anything. It's just like: "Well, what did you say? What were you feeling?" It made it easier in some ways.

You have a great ensemble cast, including Will Poulter, Cosmo Jarvis and Joseph Quinn. Did their camaraderie remind you of their real-life counterparts, Ray?
Mendoza: We did training designed to create that sort of tight-knit culture. For me, that was the most important piece of context I could give them. They're not spending years together like I did with my friends, where we slept together, worked out together and fought together, but we had time to teach them about the principles of team over self. I was proud to see that, and jealous in some ways. I wish I could go through that again.
Woon-A-Tai: We only had four weeks, but we very much bonded. A lot of us got matching tattoos, if that gives you an idea about how close we got.

Do you consider *Warfare* to be an anti-war film?
Garland: I would say it's not possible to show war in any way that resembles what it really is, in terms of its brutality and violence and emptiness, without it being anti-war.
Mendoza: Our aim was to be authentic, and to show the texture of war that I think people need to not forget about it. If you watch that and you're like, "Fuck, yeah, war is awesome," then there's probably something wrong with you. This is what war looks like. I'm not saying, "Don't go to war." The people that are in charge make those decisions, and they shouldn't take that decision lightly because there are people who will answer the call. This was just an event, one of many events that took place in the longest war in American history.
Woon-A-Tai: When I watched it, it didn't make me want to enlist.

***WARFARE* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 18 APRIL**

Sprint to the finish

IN A WORLD-FIRST, EDGAR WRIGHT TELLS *EMPIRE* ABOUT SHOOTING HIS EPIC SCI-FI THE RUNNING MAN

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

Director Edgar Wright on the gameshow set. **Below:** Running Men: Josh Brolin, Glen Powell and Colman Domingo will all star in the film.

EDGAR WRIGHT HASN'T stopped running since November. "It's appropriate for *The Running Man*," he laughs, having finally taken a breather from directing his new film at Leavesden to give a world-exclusive first-look interview to *Empire*. "It's a marathon. We've already shot in London and Glasgow, we're going to Bulgaria... It's quite the ambitious endeavour."

The Running Man was, of course, the 1987 movie in which Arnold Schwarzenegger's Ben Richards donned a yellow onesie and entered a killer futuristic game show, taking out a horde of Hunters to stay alive. It was very much an Arnie movie, with plenty of quips and cool kills.

But Wright is not remaking that movie. Instead, he's zeroing in on the original source material, a 1982 novel by one Richard Bachman, aka Stephen King. "One of the things about the book that I loved was the fact that Ben Richards is out in the world on his own, so it's like the deadliest game of hide and seek," says Wright.

The Arnie movie confined that deadly game to a subterranean set. There is still a gameshow set here (which Wright is on in our pic), one which will be presided over by Colman Domingo's flamboyant host and, pulling the strings in the background, Josh Brolin as the show's producer, Dan Killian. But Wright has widened the movie's iris, hence the multiple locations. "It does feel like making a road movie in a lot of ways: a very intense, dangerous road movie," he adds. "Ben is moving through different environments and meeting different people as he tries to survive 30 days out in the wild."

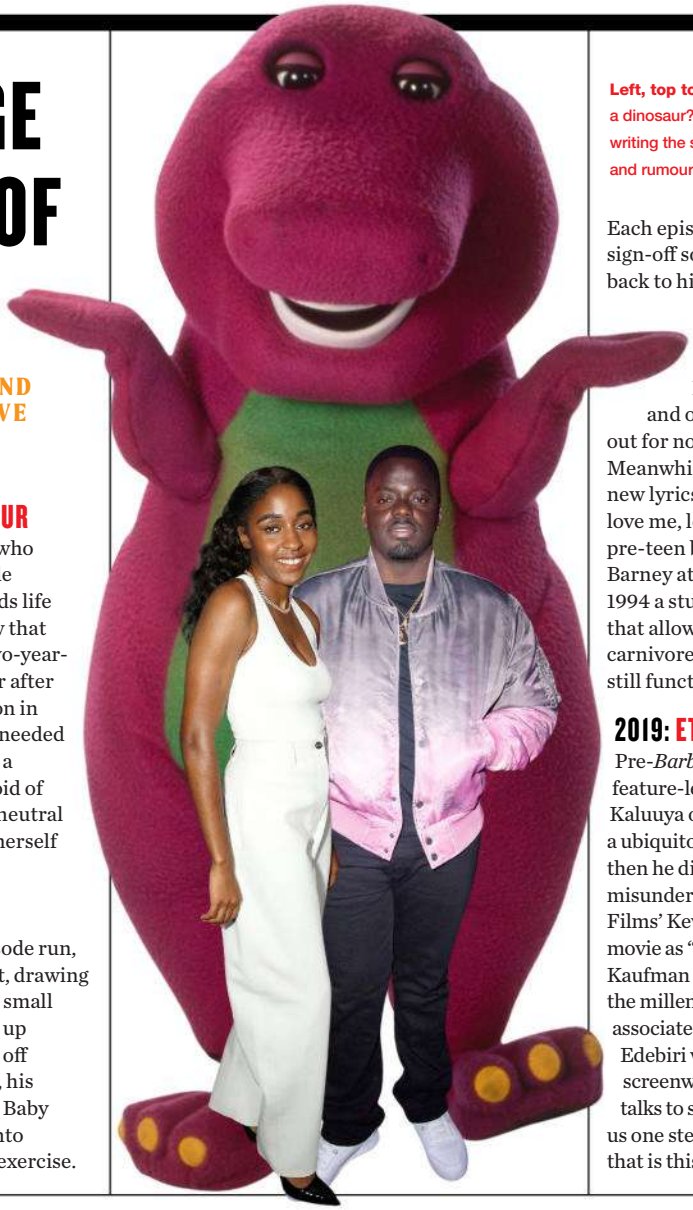
It's a sci-fi, set in the near future (the novel is set in 2025, and paints that year as a dystopian nightmare; points for Mr King), allowing Wright to employ a grounded aesthetic ("We wanted to, as much as possible, shoot everything in-camera"). In keeping with that approach, he's plumped for Glen Powell to play Richards. "I felt it was important to see somebody who hadn't really done something like this before," explains Wright. "It's similar to Bruce Willis, when he was still the guy from *Moonlighting*, before he did *Die Hard*, where that adds to the suspense. Can they make it?"

That's the million-dollar question. Powell's Richards will not be an unstoppable one-man army. He'll be a desperate fugitive, using his wits to stay alive. Which will mean lots of action and skin-of-the-teeth escapes. And yes, running. Lots of running. "Glen's been throwing himself into everything," says Wright. "He's been like a human dynamo." Let the chase begin.

***THE RUNNING MAN* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 7 NOVEMBER**

THE STRANGE EVOLUTION OF BARNEY

CHARTING THE RISE, FALL AND RESURGENCE OF THE DIVISIVE DINOSAUR AHEAD OF A NEW BIG-SCREEN ADVENTURE



Left, top to bottom: "Who you calling a dinosaur?"; Barney army: Ayo Edebiri, who's writing the script, with the movie's producer and rumoured co-star Daniel Kaluuya.

1987: (WO)MAN CREATES DINOSAUR

It was a former teacher, Sheryl Leach, who created the six-foot PB&J-loving purple Tyrannosaurus rex as a way to teach kids life lessons and skills. Keen to make a show that would hold the attention of her own two-year-old son, she came up with the character after a visit to a travelling dinosaur exhibition in Dallas. For the show, Barney naturally needed a family-friendly makeover, so became a stuffed toy brought to life instead, devoid of sharp teeth and claws and in a gender-neutral colour. Leach would go on to describe herself in interviews as "Barney's mom".

1992: T-REX ON THE TV

Initially picked up by PBS for a 30-episode run, *Barney & Friends* became a runaway hit, drawing in an average of 1.7 million viewers (no small feat for the time). The show would end up lasting a staggering 14 seasons, coming off the air in 2010. The format saw Barney, his knee-high cohort and fellow dinosaurs Baby Bop, BJ and Riff sing songs and delve into universal themes like family, food and exercise. Each episode was capped off with Barney's sign-off song 'I Love You' before he'd shrink back to his stuffed-toy form.

1993: "I LOVE YOU, YOU HATE ME"

For all his wholesome intentions, Barney was also subject to criticism and outright hate. Parents called the show out for not handling knottier subjects enough. Meanwhile, kids came up with imaginative new lyrics to the theme song ("I love you, you love me, let's all go and kill Barney"), three pre-teen boys attacked a man dressed up as Barney at a Texas shopping mall in 1993, and in 1994 a student created Barney Fun Page — a site that allows you to destroy the unfortunate carnivore with various weapons, and which is still functioning today.

2019: ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF A DINO MIND

Pre-*Barbie* mania, Mattel announced a new feature-length Barney outing with Daniel Kaluuya on board as producer. "[He] was a ubiquitous figure in many of our childhoods, then he disappeared into the shadows, left misunderstood," Kaluuya said in 2019. Mattel Films' Kevin McKeon has since described the movie as "surrealistic", with shades of Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze, the narrative mining the millennial angst and disenchantment associated with Barney. This February, Ayo Edebiri was announced as making her feature screenwriting debut on the project and is also in talks to star, possibly alongside Kaluuya, bringing us one step closer to cracking open the enigma that is this prehistoric protagonist. **BETH WEBB**

ON OUR MINDS

DAFT MUSINGS FROM THE WARPED MINDS OF TEAM *EMPIRE*

BILL McCONKEY

BETH WEBB IS THINKING ABOUT... BENOIT BLANC'S BOUFFANT

A fresh line-up of suspects isn't the only new addition to the *Knives Out* series. Everyone's favourite Colonel Sanders soundalike has a changed-up floppy coiff for *Wake Up Dead Man*. Could this spell a more boho Blanc? Here's hoping.

ALEX GODFREY IS THINKING ABOUT... THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ROGER RABBIT

I watched the film again and the cartoon at the start is SO GOOD. A masterclass in slapstick violence. All of the Roger Rabbit shorts were wild, and the last one was in 1993! It is so ripe for reinvention. Disney+, sort it out!

JOHN NUGENT IS THINKING ABOUT... THE OTHER WITCH FILM

The only *Wizard Of Oz* adaptation I'm interested in is the bizarre-looking Russian film *The Wizard Of Emerald City*, in which the Scarecrow is a potato sack with a smiley face, the cowardly lion is rendered in full CGI, and Toto talks. In Russian!

Imago, Marco Vittur

The crime comedy that says, "Yes, and..."

DEEP COVER SEES THREE IMPROV ACTORS TRY TO INFILTRATE THE LONDON UNDERWORLD. *EMPIRE* GOES ON SET TO WITNESS THE MAYHEM

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

EMPIRE HAS SEEN actors practise their lines before. But never like this. "WHOOOOO!" yelps Nick Mohammed, as he snorts a rail of white powder, watched closely by a smirking Paddy Considine. "That's not flour. That's cocaine. Good to confirm. Lovely, lovely."

No, we're not at some clandestine Hollywood debauch, but London North Studios, where comedy thriller *Deep Cover* is shooting an early scene, in which three improv comics — played by Mohammed, Bryce Dallas Howard and Orlando Bloom — are finding themselves way, way, *way* outside their comfort zones. Having been recruited by the police to deploy their skills as undercover operatives, they're in a scuzzy bar, attempting a sting operation on a bunch of criminal lowlifes. Mohammed's Hugh, the worst at improv of the lot, is masquerading as an up-market kingpin known as 'The Squire'; to prove he's legit, the fumbling, nervous, ever-polite doofus is doing line after line of powerful class-A narcotics, goaded on by Considine's gang-lord. "I don't know what it's made of, but it's okay to snort," promises director Tom Kingsley, the man who shot most of Channel 4 sitcom *Stath Lets Flats*, of the faux devil's dandruff. "We're using a snort rig, which is basically a vacuum cleaner tube up his arm."

Deep Cover is an interesting amalgam of rising British comedy talent and Hollywood blockbuster veterans. The idea originated with *Jurassic World* director Colin Trevorrow and his writing partner Derek Connolly, back in 2011. A self-described "comedy nerd" who once interned at *Saturday Night Live* and even tried his hand at stand-up and improv — "I know enough about them to know I shouldn't do them professionally," he laughs — Trevorrow found himself thinking about the project again during the pandemic-era production of *Jurassic World Dominion*. Among the people quarantining in the hotel that acted as *Jurassic* HQ were British comedians Alexander Owen and Ben Ashenden, aka The Pin, to whom Trevorrow had offered small roles in the film. The three got on like a dinosaur theme park on fire, and the director gave them his

Main: The comedians (Bryce Dallas Howard, Nick Mohammed and Orlando Bloom) improv wildly to hoodwink Paddy Considine's gang lord. **Below:** Going underground. **Bottom:** Ian McShane goes full bad guy; She's here all week.

old script to reinvent as a UK-set caper.

"They boiled it down to a reduction, and then made a new sauce," says Trevorrow. "When we initially did it, it was a New York movie. It's amazing how the fundamentals are the same. As you can see, we're shooting it like a serious, dramatic crime thriller. These guys are in the absolute real world, which is what makes us laugh."

Alongside Hugh, attempting to "yes, and" their way through their perilous predicament are Howard's Kat and Bloom's Marlon, representing different sides and talent levels of the improv scene. Kat is an expert at quick-thinking, a "charismatic, cool, super-sharp American woman who has this Sherlock-like superpower: just 'bang, bang, bang'," says Owen. Marlon, on the other hand, is an intensely serious Method actor who wildly over-estimates his ability to infiltrate a criminal hive. "His outfit's very much a nod to *Serpico*," Owen laughs. "We see him auditioning for a crap advert and complaining to his agent, 'I want to plumb the depths of the human condition.' His agent goes, 'You're from the Cotswolds. You're not Al Pacino.' And his whole mission in the film really is to prove that he is Al Pacino."

With action sequences including a car chase through the streets of London, plus villains such as a big boss played by Ian McShane, the improvisational skills of all three will be sorely tested. That is, if they manage to get through the cocaine scene. "Didn't Jonah Hill have to go to hospital during the filming of *Wolf Of Wall Street*?" ponders Owen, watching as Mohammed lets out a hilarious, hopefully fake howl of anguish, then another "WHOOOO!", before going in for another line. Nobody tell Ted Lasso.

***DEEP COVER* IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM 12 JUNE**

Top to bottom: Sauron (Charlie Vickers) in Season 3; Facing Galadriel (Morfydd Clark); Elrond (Robert Aramayo) in a tight spot.

MIDDLE-EARTH PREPARES TO TIME-JUMP

WE ASK — AND ATTEMPT TO ANSWER — QUESTIONS ABOUT *THE RINGS OF POWER*'S IMMINENT LEAP FORWARD

BEFORE WE GET INTO THIS TIME-JUMP BUSINESS, CAN YOU BRING US UP TO SPEED ON WHERE WE WERE AT THE END OF SEASON 2? QUICKLY, PLEASE. Sure. Ring-smith Celebrimbor's dead. Sauron's made all the rings of power (for Dwarves and humans), deposed his old buddy Adar and has an army of Orcs at his disposal. Oh, and the Stranger is Gandalf, but we all knew that anyway.

SO NOW WE'RE LEAPING FORWARD IN TIME, WILL WE GET TO SEE GOLLUM? No. He's still millennia away (even though Gandalf was supposed to be too, but let's not get into that). This season is merely "several years" on, according to the official announcement, taking place "at the height of the War of the Elves and Sauron" — which broke out last season — "as the Dark Lord seeks to craft the One Ring."

RIGHT. THANKS. BUT WHEN *EXACTLY* IS THIS SEASON STARTING? Well, if you refer to Appendix B of *The Lord Of The Rings*, it says the War of the Elves and Sauron takes place between the years 1693 and 1700 of the Second Age. So that would put Season 3 as starting no more than seven years later.

GOTCHA. THOUGH YOU NEARLY LOST ME AT "APPENDIX B". SO SAURON'S FINALLY GETTING THE PRECIOUS THIS SEASON, THEN? It's very likely. Although, according to the Append-... uh, the bit at the back of the book, Sauron actually forged the One Ring around 90 years *before* the war started. So showrunners J.D. Payne and Patrick McKay continue to tinker with the chronology.

LET'S GET BACK TO THE 'WAR' BIT. WILL THIS BE THE MASSIVE FIGHT FROM THE START OF THE FIRST *LORD OF THE RINGS* FILM? No. Even though they've crunched the timeline, that's still later. This is the battle for Eriador — where Elf sanctuary Rivendell will likely have been founded, by Elrond, by the time this season starts.

BUT IT'S STILL GONNA BE A BIG FIGHT, RIGHT? Yeah. Monstrous, even. And now that Sauron's got his nine rings for the oh-so-corruptible humans, we may even get to see some Ringwraiths... **DAN JOLIN**

***THE RINGS OF POWER* SEASON 3 DOES NOT YET HAVE A RELEASE DATE**

Is AI-powered acting inevitable?

EMPIRE HEARS FROM BOTH SIDES IN THE TECH DISPUTE THAT'S SPLITTING HOLLYWOOD

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

"ADRIEN AND FELICITY'S PERFORMANCES are completely their own."

It's not the sort of statement you'd expect the director of a multi-award-nominated film (in this case *The Brutalist*'s Brady Corbet) would be forced to issue on behalf of his multi-award-nominated actors (Adrien Brody and Felicity Jones). But that's what happened in January, when it was revealed that voice-generating AI had been used in the movie to make both stars sound more authentic during scenes where they spoke Hungarian. And *The Brutalist* isn't the only recent high-profile film to face criticism for its AI use — *A Complete Unknown* used it to help create shots featuring a motorcycle; it was responsible for turning actors' eyes blue in *Dune: Part Two*; and it was employed in *Emilia Pérez* for voice-cloning to enhance lead actor Karla Sofía Gascón's singing range.

The fallout that followed these revelations — "This is a disgrace," wrote one social-media user — has led to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences exploring the idea of changing its Oscar submission guidelines to make disclosure of AI use mandatory. For Tim Friedlander, president of the National Association of Voice Actors, that move would be a positive one. "Being transparent up front with the audience would have [eased] the backlash," he tells *Empire*. "Just like you know the nutritional content of your food before you eat it, you should know the AI content of movies, so you can choose whether or not to watch. In [*The Brutalist*], once you find out Adrien and Felicity aren't speaking authentically, there are seeds of doubt about what *else* might be inauthentic."

The Brutalist's editor, Dávid Jancsó, claimed he used AI to make the actors' Hungarian dialect sound so perfect that "not even locals will spot any difference". But it begs the question of where this might lead — if AI can refine actors'

THE PIPELINE

EIGHT PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

WORDS **JORDAN KING**

UNTITLED JOSEPH KOSINSKI UFO MOVIE

Joseph Kosinski is reteaming with his *Top Gun: Maverick* producer Jerry Bruckheimer on a UFO conspiracy thriller. Described as "*All The President's Men* with aliens", the movie — penned by Zach Baylin — has sparked a massive bidding war between many major Hollywood studios.

GOODBYE JUNE

Kate Winslet will make her directorial debut with a Netflix-bound drama co-starring Winslet alongside Toni Collette, Johnny Flynn, Andrea Riseborough, Timothy Spall and Helen Mirren. Due to shoot "soon", the film focuses on a fractious set of siblings as trying times pull them together.

NOWHERE FAST

Chris Pine is returning to Texas for the first time since *Hell Or High Water* to lead *Fargo* creator Noah Hawley's latest, an original crime thriller set in the Lone Star state. The plot centres around a small-time criminal who unwittingly kills his boss' nephew.

Illustration: Russell Moorcroft

vowel sounds today, could it generate *entire accents* for them tomorrow? "That scenario is definitely foreseeable — where an actor no longer needs to do an accent [because AI will 'do' it for them]," admits Framestore creative director Tim Webber, who won the 2014 Visual Effects Oscar for *Gravity*. "That's worrying because, to me, the skill of a performance is about the emotional portrayal, not how perfect the accent is." For Webber, who does also see positive potential in AI, it has become such a hot-button topic in the wake of 2023's Hollywood strikes, it's difficult to even speak about it. "AI isn't really doing anything new or different — it just speeds things up," he explains. "But reactions to it are so strong that we can't talk about it openly, even when people would generally be quite accepting, I think."

Webber's view is shared by Jennie Zeiher, president of Rising Sun Pictures — the company that used machine learning to blend Anya Taylor-Joy's face with younger actor Alyla Browne's for scenes in *Furiosa*. "We've been doing stunt face replacements for decades; we're just using a new tool for it now," Zeiher tells us. "[AI] is a sensitive area because it's about people's jobs, and that's what we need to protect. We want to put these tools in the hands of human artists."

Friedlander, though, is adamant that voice actors are "already losing jobs" or seeing their voices cloned and "used without permission" due to the kind of generative AI employed in *The Brutalist* and *Emilia Pérez*. He adds that AI could also spell trouble for background actors: "It will be as easy to replace background actors as it is to replace voice actors, since they are usually not recognisable faces."

Another worry is that, as the technology progresses, the line between human performance and AI will become increasingly blurred. Friedlander suggests we might eventually see "a situation where a performance must use under a certain percentage of AI, otherwise the human can't take credit or win awards for it". He adds, "Without regulation, this [technology] could lead to the decimation of art by humans."

Webber doesn't feel this as strongly, though he admits "swinging between hopes and fears" when it comes to AI: "Ideally, it will just become another tool, used responsibly and carefully to broaden what humans can achieve." Is there a future in which an artificial intelligence could one day win the Best Actor Oscar? Webber laughs: "Only if we develop Artificial General Intelligence (*AI that surpasses human cognitive abilities*), which I think is a *long* way off. But I'd be concerned about more than just films at that point, as we'd probably have an AI President, too..." A robot world leader in a red 'MAIGA' hat? Adrien Brody's vowel sounds suddenly seem far less worrying.

KILL YOUR DARLINGS

Julia Roberts and James Gray are tackling an adaptation of bestselling novelist Peter Swanson's forthcoming book, a murder mystery told in reverse. Roberts will star as Wendy Graves, whose seemingly picture-perfect life belies a shocking, potentially deadly secret buried in her and her husband's past.

ANIMALS

Ben Affleck has enlisted Gillian Anderson, **Steven Yeun** and Kerry Washington's services for his latest directorial effort. Circling an LA shoot sometime this year, the actor-filmmaker will both call the shots on and star in this one, where the plot revolves around a kidnapping.

EPIPHANY

Palm Springs writer-director Max Barbakow is bringing together Bill Murray and **Kristen Wiig** for his latest odd-couple comedy. This one sees Wiig's fashionista heiress Favorite Ives make a play for Murray's eccentric billionaire math whizz Oz Bell when her fortune evaporates overnight.

THE RAGE

Matthew McConaughey will lead a major uprising in auteur Paul Greengrass' self-penned next movie. Set in 14th-century England amid the Peasants' Revolt, Greengrass' period piece follows McConaughey's character, rumoured to be legendary rebel Wat Tyler, as he goes from humble farmer to revolt leader.

BASKETFUL OF HEADS

A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night director Ana Lily Amirpour's feature adaptation of Joe Hill's comedy-horror comics has found its June Branch. **Natasha Lyonne** will play Hill's anti-hero, who tries to rescue her boyfriend with a magical axe and an ever-growing bag of talking, decapitated heads.

Alamy, Imago

From codebreaker to widow-maker

RAMI MALEK AND CO ON HOW THE AMATEUR IS BREAKING THE VIGILANTE MOULD

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

FOR YEARS, RAMI MALEK had wanted to make an action movie. But not your average muscles-and-guns genre flick. He wanted to take the kind of unlikely hero that he'd played during his four-year stint on hackers show *Mr. Robot* and transplant him into the world of espionage. "I kept thinking about those elegant 'everyman' [action] films, like *The Fugitive* or *Three Days Of The Condor*," he tells *Empire*. *The Amateur* allowed him to do just that. In the film he plays Charlie Heller, a CIA decoder who goes on a revenge-fuelled crusade after his wife Sarah (Rachel Brosnahan) is murdered during a terrorist attack. Malek, co-star Laurence Fishburne and director James Hawes describe how they're serving up an alternative to your average fist-throwing frontman.

HE CAN'T FIGHT

From James Bond to Jason Bourne, the most successful spy movies tend to centre either on cool-headed weapons masters or muscle-bound bruisers. Computer nerd Heller is neither. "He's caught in a situation way above his pay-grade, and has to take matters into his own hands," Malek explains. "He's not an Ethan Hunt. He's an ordinary man doing extraordinary things." This was also the big draw for director James Hawes, who has previously helped flip the spy genre on its head with *Slow Horses*. "It felt like a different approach to the 'underdog'," he says of *The Amateur*. "Charlie Heller is not going to turn into a ninja. He doesn't have 'moves'. So, the idea of watching him become this improbable revenge machine seemed really fun."

BUT HE IS RESOURCEFUL

What our hero lacks in trigger-happiness, he more than makes up for with meticulous planning. "[Charlie] becomes an expert in turning his environment against the people he's hunting," says Hawes. And nothing quite says 'top of your field' like decompressing a glass-bottomed pool atop a hotel, Heller sending one of his wife's assailants plummeting 19 storeys, a tsunami of water and glass on his heels. "Annoyingly the hotel [London's Embassy Gardens] would not let us blow up their pool," Hawes laughs. "So, we recreated a vast section of

Clockwise from left: Charlie Heller (Rami Malek) is out for revenge; Henderson (Laurence Fishburne) is the man to help him; Malek on location; Pool mayhem imminent; Heller and doomed wife Sarah (Rachel Brosnahan).

it [on a soundstage] and blew that up instead. When you see the man dragged back through the water as the glass cracks, that's real."

HE'S UP AGAINST OVERWHELMING ODDS

Like any decent everyman, Heller is chronically underestimated by his battle-hardy peers. "You're just a nerdy fella that works on computers... What you're doing is gonna kill you," one operative, played by Jon Bernthal, tells Hellers. According to Laurence Fishburne, whose character Henderson is tasked with getting our guy battle-ready, this all plays into Heller's appeal. "He just has that human impulse — the desire for payback," he tells *Empire*. "But he's obviously not equipped for it, and that's where the movie becomes really watchable, because you're just waiting for this guy to get killed. Because he's *not* a killer."

AND HE'S PRONE TO PUKING

Not only is Heller not a killer, he also can't stomach confrontation. Moments after attempting to blackmail a superior in his office, Heller steps out to the nearby car park and is violently sick. "I fought for that scene in the edit!" says Malek, who is also an executive producer on *The Amateur*. "As a producer, you're looking for moments that tether the story together in a human way. And I kept saying — 'That scene is *real*!'" Yes, as Charlie Heller, Malek is — quite literally — leaving it all on the field. **TOM ELLEN**

***THE AMATEUR* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 11 APRIL**

Imago, Marco Vittur

THE PLATFORM

"Sunnydale may be ashes, but from them a new Buffy is rising"

BETH WEBB ON WHY A BELOVED VAMPIRE SHOW DESERVES A FRESH START

AHEAD OF THE release of *I Saw The TV Glow* last year, I dived into the film's influences with director Jane Schoenbrun. Unsurprisingly, given its homage to '90s and '00s YA TV, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* came up. "I cared more about who the characters on *Buffy* were going to the prom with than I did about my own prom," they told me enthusiastically. Because, to many, *Buffy* — which ran for seven seasons from 1997 to 2003 — was a show that offered comfort and strength through its band of demon-offing oddballs. And now, with a Sarah Michelle Gellar-fronted reboot pilot episode lined up with Chloé Zhao at the helm, the people who loved it can rejoice once more. "Thank you to all the fans who never stopped asking for this. This will be for you," wrote Gellar on social media.

Make no mistake; the original cast of Buffy were conventionally attractive. But its core characters spent their free time in the shadowy library with a middle-aged man (Anthony Head's gentle Giles). They were total goofballs and yet heroes, time and time again. In the Season 5 finale, when our temporarily deceased protagonist was buried, her gravestone read: "She saved the world. A lot."

However, in recent years, *Buffy* fans have been tested. In 2021, Charisma Carpenter, who played the acerbic-but-likeable Cordelia, took to Twitter to say that creator Joss Whedon had "created hostile and toxic work environments" on the set of *Buffy* and its spin-off, *Angel*. "Joss was the vampire," she wrote. Carpenter was quickly backed up by fellow castmates, including Gellar.

The following year, *New York Magazine* ran a lengthy report on Whedon and accusations of misogyny made by those who worked with him on *Buffy* and beyond. It was crushing for those who loved this show about a complex and powerful young woman. Whedon was baked into its fabric, from cooking up its punchy, truncated dialogue ("What's the sitch?", "Vamped out") to writing and directing some of its most memorable episodes ('Once More, With Feeling', 'Hush').

If this reboot goes full steam ahead, which feels more than likely, we would get to see *Buffy* freed from its vampire. The pilot of the next chapter will be directed by Zhao and written by *Poker Face* showrunners Nora and Lilla Zuckerman, with no involvement from Whedon. The original show's finale has presented a clean slate, with the town destroyed and a global army of slayers primed to carry the mantle. Sunnydale may be ashes, but from them a new Buffy is rising.

Bolts from the blue

AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH CO-WRITERS JAMES CAMERON, AMANDA SILVER AND RICK JAFFA ON POOLING IMAGINATIONS TO BUILD A SCI-FI COLOSSUS

WORDS **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

WANT AN EPIC cinematic universe? Create an epic writers' room. That was James Cameron's strategy when it came to his *Avatar* sequels: he handpicked four screenwriters to join him in creating a vast story, then assigned them each a slice of the Pandoran pie. Josh Friedman got *Avatar 4*. Shane Salerno got *Avatar 5*. And Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver, the husband-and-wife team behind *Rise* and *Dawn Of The Planet Of The Apes*, ended up working on two screenplays with Cameron: *The Way Of Water* and this year's *Fire And Ash*. Here, the trio discuss the process.

Can you describe a day in the *Avatar* writers' room?

James Cameron: When you're putting together a writers' room, what you look for is the quality of the joke-telling and the personal hygiene. Fairly in that order. If some writing should happen to break out somewhere in there, so much the better.

Rick Jaffa: We'd usually get to writing around four o'clock in the afternoon.

Cameron: Well, on a good day. I mean, we're pretty disciplined. We always set aside exactly 15 minutes for creative bullshitting. I think if you look at the Writers Guild bylaws, it's a mandatory 15 minutes of bullshit.

Amanda Silver: Not surprisingly, Jim is very good at casting, and so the room clicked fairly quickly. After the writers had gone to school about what Pandora was like, the rules — everything from the way gravity worked to the

UNTITLED AVATAR THREE
Written by
JAMES CAMERON, RICK JAFFA & AMANDA SILVER
From a story by
JAMES CAMERON, RICK JAFFA & AMANDA SILVER,
JOSH FRIEDMAN and SHANE SALERNO
DRAFT NA3 V.3
JUNE 06, 2017
EYES ONLY: DO NOT COPY
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Main: Taking the plunge — concept art for the new movie. **Above:** The then-untitled script.

botany, the hardware, the RDA — we started talking about story. And this kind of weird hive-mind happened.

Cameron: Rick and Amanda and Shane and Josh and I sat in a room for five months, with big whiteboards. The art department was just up the fire stairs from where we were. And I'd go up there and just start ripping art off the walls and bring it down and tack it up in the writing room.

Silver: It was spectacular. You're talking about a character deeply for days and days, and all of a sudden there they are.

Jaffa: Creatures too. At one point, Jim, you said that you like to name your characters as soon as possible. Because once you give them a name, they become that much more alive and that much more real.

Cameron: The second a character has a name, they have an existence.

We won't ask about the personal hygiene. But who is the best joke-teller?

Cameron: I'm going to go with Amanda.

Jaffa: I'll go with Amanda too.

Cameron: Amanda on warmth, heart, structure... But Rick, you get some zingers in. You're more acerbic. I remember your favourite expression, which always gave me pause, was, "The math doesn't add up on this."

Jaffa: The trick was, I didn't understand it either.

Cameron: It sounded good. But you know what? We don't have to know what everything means that we write. It just has to sound good. You think E.E. Cummings knew what his own shit meant?

Jaffa: (*Laughs*) No, his typewriter got stuck. That's what it was.

The script for *Way Of Water* ended up becoming two films, with *Fire And Ash* emerging out of it. How did that happen?

Cameron: In a nutshell, we had too many great ideas packed into act one of movie 2. The [film] was moving like a bullet train, and we weren't drilling down enough on character. So I said, "Guys, we've got to split it." We took three hours of story and expanded it to six-and-a-half hours between the two movies. Because movie 3 will actually be a little bit longer than movie 2.

Silver: The characters needed to breathe. These movies are a lot more than just propulsive plot and gorgeous spectacle. I mean, these are real characters.

Cameron: There was one scene — and I don't want to say what the scene is —with Jake and [adoptive son] Spider that always ripped our hearts out. And eventually it had to come out of movie 2 and go into movie 3. And now I think it orchestrates beautifully across the two films.

Was one character particularly satisfying for each of you to write on *Fire And Ash*?

Jaffa: [The Sullys' middle son] Lo'ak was the one I enjoyed, loved — connected to is probably a better way to say it. A good friend of mine who saw *Way Of Water* — a woman I grew up with — wrote to me after she'd seen it, and said that the relationship between Lo'ak and Neteyam reminded her of the relationship I had with my older brother. ›

Here: James Cameron, Trinity Bliss, Britain Dalton, Jack Champion and Sigourney Weaver consult the script on set of *Fire And Ash*. **Below:** Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver.

Cameron: Family was the thing we kept coming back to. We are all family people, except Shane — Shane related to family through *The Godfather*. (*Laughs*) I have five kids. My youngest is 18. But I was sort of in the thick of it in 2013, when we were doing our work together in the room. I'd spend all day in the writing room, then go home and get to live it for real. And all of that's there. These characters are amalgams of us, our childhoods, our role as parents, the mistakes we made, and probably to some extent continue to make as parents. A lot of self-reflection. I mean, Jake is a hard-ass motherfucker. He's very hard on his kids. Well, that's me. I said, "Let's make him an asshole. Let's make him The Great Santini. Let's challenge the audience to like him, and see that it's coming from love and fear and all of those things."

Jaffa: The kids aren't the only ones on these journeys of self-discovery, you know? Even people our age are still on these journeys, and I think Jake is too. You know, he's in a tight spot.

Silver: I love Lo'ak also. But in *A3*, there's a new character coming who I really loved working on. It's not that I'm like this character necessarily, but I really enjoyed writing her.

Cameron: Well, the good news is Disney likes [fearsome Ash Clan leader] Varang a lot. She's gonna be showing up a lot in the trailers, the art and all that.

Silver: That's the one I'm talking about.

You screened *Thunderball* while working on *Way Of Water*. Did you look at anything for *Fire And Ash*?

Jaffa: I mean, Jim sent us a lot. When we first signed up, we joked that a giant truck backed up to the house and unloaded books and DVDs and such. But we looked at a lot of different material.

Silver: *The Emerald Forest*, wasn't it?

Jaffa: *The Emerald Forest* was a movie we looked at, yeah. And *Pocahontas*.

Cameron: Some of that stuff we'd just look at in the writers' room, and some of it we'd go down to the screening room. There were a bunch of indigenous films, and South American jungle films — *Medicine Man* with Sean Connery, stuff like that. We looked at *The Mission*. I don't think we watched all of *Thunderball*. We watched the big underwater fight at the end.

Payakan — the talking whale — was a huge swing. Are there more big swings coming?

Cameron: They're all big swings. It's that great equipoise in doing an ongoing narrative: how do you swerve and have the audience hold onto the handlebars while their ass is flying off the seat, and at the same time be true to the principles that you set down to begin with? And again, it's character. The continuity of character and caring about them and going on their journey, even when they get knocked down and they've got to pick themselves back up.

Silver: Kiri's on a journey of identity. But so is Jake.

Cameron: And so is Neytiri, and so is Quaritch. I can't wait for you guys to see this, because you're going to see such a cool evolution. It's the evolution we all talked about. We put it there on the page, but to see the actors bring it to life, it's special. I mean, my wife watched the whole thing from end to end — she had kept herself away from it and I wasn't showing her bits and pieces as we went along. This was December 22nd. She bawled for four hours.

Silver: She did?

Cameron: She kept trying to get her shit back together so she could tell me specific reactions, and then she'd just tear up and start crying again.

Silver: Oh, I love that.

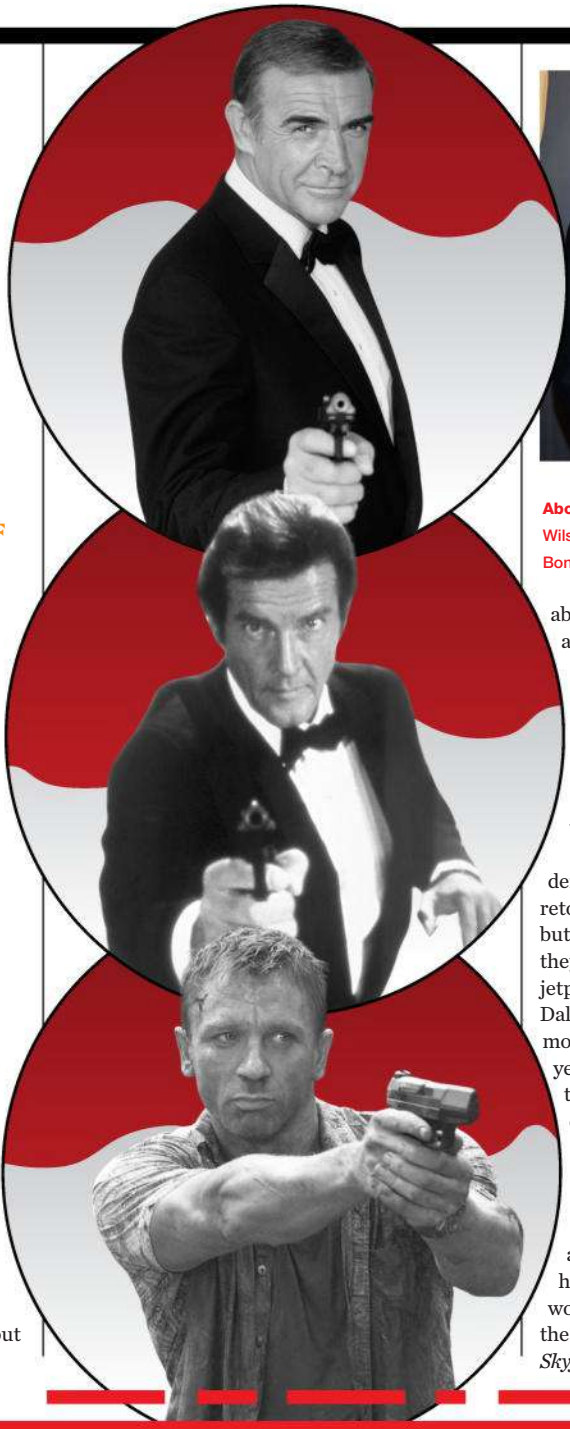
Cameron: Finally, I'm like, "Honey, I've got to go to bed. Sorry, we'll talk about it some other time." (*Laughs*) She's a pretty good bellwether — she called the ball on *Titanic* and *Avatar* and *Avatar 2*. So I trust her heart on it.

***AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 19 DECEMBER**

Concept art by Dylan Cole, BTS Photo by Mark Fellman, Cut out: Alex J. Berliner ©2025 20th Century Studios. All Rights Reserved. Additional imagery: Getty Images, Imago

A LEGACY SHAKEN, A FUTURE STIRRED

EMPIRE ASSESSES THE FUTURE OF AN AMAZON-OWNED BOND



Above: End of an era: Barbara Broccoli and Michael G. Wilson have sold the franchise. **Left:** Their word was their Bond — Sean Connery, Roger Moore and Daniel Craig.

IN THE WORLD of James Bond, jaws haven't dropped this hard and fast since Jaws himself suffered a mid-air parachute malfunction in *Moonraker*. On 20 February, Amazon MGM Studios announced that long-time 007 custodians Barbara Broccoli and Michael G. Wilson had ceded creative control of the superspy's future to the entertainment giant to the tune of $1 billion. "With the conclusion of *No Time To Die* and Michael retiring from the films, I feel it is time to focus on my other projects," Broccoli said.

The news has concerned many fans, with fears ranging from earnest (the kind of brand-dilution some perceive in the Marvel and *Star Wars* IPs) to far-fetched (Jeff Bezos casting himself as Bond). The Amazon founder even took to X shortly after the news broke to ask his 6.8 million followers who should play 007 (replies included Henry Cavill, Idris Elba and Melania Trump).

So what's next for cinema's favourite martini-quaffer? Big and small-screen spin-offs seem inevitable. M, Q and Moneypenny could get the expanded-universe treatment, while other double-0 agents might emerge from MI6's shadows; Ian Fleming rarely mentioned them in his books, but Kim Sherwood's current continuation novels, about a trio of 00s hunting for a missing Bond, are ripe for adaptation.

Maybe we'll see a young James, adapted from Charlie Higson's YA books, or a pre-MI6 Bond? Fleming had him serving in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in World War II, but Michael G. Wilson imagined the contemporary Bond as having "been through the wars [...] he's probably been in the SAS."

Amazon's task ahead is trickier than defusing a bomb in a clown suit. A radical retooling could attract a whole new audience, but stray too far from the proven template and they'll find themselves under fire without a jetpack to escape with. It's a risk that Timothy Dalton addressed in a recent interview. "The movies have taken different courses over the years, but there is something very good about the original," he said. "I hope Amazon latch onto that and give us the kind of film that's brought so much excitement and fun to so many people."

And the clock is ticking. With over three years since a barrage of missiles ended Bond as we know him in *No Time To Die*'s climax, his new handlers don't have all the time in the world to assign him his next mission. Perhaps the only advice they need comes from M in *Skyfall*: "Don't cock it up." **NEIL ALCOCK**

ON HER MAJESTY'S STREAMING SERVICE

WE PITCH POTENTIAL SMALL-SCREEN SPIN-OFF IDEAS FOR BEYOND BOND

HENCHMEN ORIGINS: NICK NACK

PITCH: This villain's origin story would focus on Scaramanga's peanut-toting servant. Witness his training as a cordon-bleu chef, see his previous attempts to murder his boss in their weirdly elaborate assassins' training facility, and probe deeper into his vengeful nature. He may be small, but he never forgets.

Q-BRANCH: A BRITISH WORKPLACE

PITCH: This sitcom peeks inside the lab that makes Bond's fancy tech. Q's assistant Smithers (introduced in *For Your Eyes Only*, not to be confused with the colonel from *Goldfinger*) tries to support the double-0s despite being routinely humiliated by his boss testing his gadgets on him — with hilarious (and explosive) results.

GOGOLBOX

PITCH: Watch M's KGB counterpart General Gogol and his secretary Rubelvitch as they sit down to watch every Bond movie in order. How far will they get through the decadent, corrupt, western agent's capitalist shenanigans before one of them hurls a bottle of vodka at the telly? **NEIL ALCOCK**

On A Role

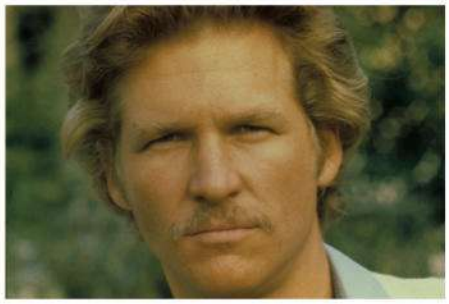
NICOLAS CAGE AS THE SURFER

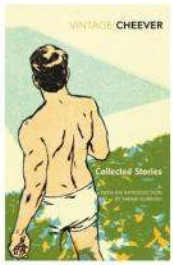
THE ACTOR PLAYS A PRIVILEGED MAN WHOSE LIFE FALLS APART IN *THE SURFER*

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

THE MINDSET

In Lorcan Finnegan's Australian-set psychological thriller, Cage's unnamed character undergoes quite the journey. As he attempts to close a deal on a beachfront property, he is terrorised by a gang of psychotic surfers, and things go south. "The main source for me," says Cage, "was John Cheever's marvellous short story 'The Swimmer', which has the poignance of a David Hockney painting. There's something heartbreaking and simple about it." In the film, Cage's character begins to unravel. Big time. "It spoke to me," says Cage of the material. "Because I've always believed that anyone can appear very normal and *be* very normal, but if you scratch the surface of that person long enough, the inner caveman's coming out. That's what I was meditating on. I wanted to show that ride: the humour of it, the sadness of it, the absurdity, the *anger*."





Top to bottom: Nicolas Cage in *The Surfer*; Jeff Bridges' character in 1981's *Cutter's Way*; House Of Pain's 'Jump Around' and John Cheever's short story were inspirations.

THE LOOK

The character is a wealthy Californian citizen returning to his native Australia, and strides around the sand in his pastel suit. He believes surfing is a way of life — and as such, he is appropriately sun-kissed, with a golden glow. "I had memories of Jeff Bridges in my mind," says Cage of who he looked to for aesthetic inspiration. "In some of his earlier movies, Jeff had this golden, wheat-coloured hair, particularly in [1981's] *Cutter's Way*. And he'd often have a beard. Jeff and I are both from California, so that was that California look, on the beach, where the sun has affected the hair and the beard. [It's] more of a tan look."

THE SONG

You won't hear it in the film, but an old-school hip-hop classic found its way into Cage's bones. "I was listening to 'Jump Around' by House Of Pain," he says — specifically for the scenes in which the local surfers mentally dismantle him. "For some reason, that song would come out when I was in my state of madness, when I was losing it at them when they were torturing my character. It was just in my head. [On location] I started mocking them back and I started singing it at them: 'Are you gonna jump around? Jump around! Jump around!' And then *they* started listening to it and then we were all singing it."

THE RAT

As Cage's surfer comes undone, a rat comes into play: a dead one, in fact, for which there was a rubber prop rat at hand. Cage, he tells us, thought back to Billy Wilder's *Sabrina* [1954], in which Humphrey Bogart's Linus shoves an olive in someone's mouth, demanding: "Eat it!" Cage loved it. "I could not stop laughing at that moment. It was just the funniest thing I'd seen. So I had this idea... I held onto this damn prop rat for two weeks," he remembers, ready to deploy it for a fight scene. "The tail was dangling out of my pocket, and everyone was asking on set, 'What is Nick doing with the prop rat, why has he still got it?' They thought it was nuts, but I had this whole thing worked out in my head: it was my homage to *Sabrina*, to shove the rat in his mouth and say, 'Eat the rat!'" he laughs. "I was really happy with the results. We went to Cannes with the film, and the response to that moment was terrific. And it all stems from Billy Wilder and Humphrey Bogart and an olive." That, ladies and gents, is Nicolas Cage.

***THE SURFER* IS IN CINEMAS THIS SPRING**

Beijing Enlight Pictures/CMC Pictures, Getty Images, Shutterstock, Vertigo Releasing

HOW A CHINESE ANIMATION PUMMELLED PIXAR

HOW NE ZHA 2 BECAME THE MOST SUCCESSFUL MOVIE OF ITS MEDIUM IN A MATTER OF WEEKS

Top to bottom: Fighting his demons: Ne Zha; The film draws on Chinese mythology and folklore; Animal magic; A fan at a screening in China.

BY THE END of last summer, *Inside Out 2* had become the highest-grossing animated movie of all time with an eye-watering $1.7 billion box-office showing. Yet six months later, Chinese family-friendly fantasy epic *Ne Zha 2* has beaten that record within just 20 days, making almost $2 billion in its home country alone. But what exactly is *Ne Zha*? And how has a sequel you've probably never heard of to a movie you've also probably never heard of become the biggest movie in the world right now?

Inspired by characters from Chinese myth and folklore, 2019's $762 million-grossing *Ne Zha* — from medical student-turned-filmmaker Jiaozi (aka Yu Yang) — drove audiences in the East wild. Combining gods, monsters, moral lessons and toilet humour to giddying effect, Jiaozi's tale of the foes-to-bros relationship formed between cantankerous demon-boy Ne Zha and dragon prince Ao Bing took a nation's cultural roots and made them accessible to a new generation.

Ne Zha 2 — which follows the titular mischief-maker and Ao Bing as they unearth a cataclysmic conspiracy — sees the filmmaker and his 4,000-strong team at Chengdu Coco Cartoon studio take the 'more is more' approach to blockbuster sequels, going bigger with the set-pieces and deeper with the characters.

IMAX China CEO Daniel Manwaring has praised the film as "the best animation quality China has ever done", while videos shared on Douyin, China's TikTok equivalent, show classes of school kids and busloads of factory workers flocking to multiplexes in a countrywide display of national pride. Such is the love for Ne Zha that when *Captain America: Brave New World* was released recently, many cinemagoers snubbed the MCU's latest specifically to help ensure their favoured (anti-)hero's box-office supremacy continues. Meanwhile, in North America, where the film hit cinemas two weeks later, it became the highest-earning Chinese film in over 20 years.

Ne Zha 2's record-breaking run could be a major turning-point in China's ability to compete with Hollywood at the global box office. Could this mean many more sequels for the nation's favourite meddlesome young misfit? Or a bigger push for homegrown animation overall? It's currently unknown whether *Ne Zha 2* will be released in the UK and Europe, but one thing we can be sure of: its place in the history books is already secured. **JORDAN KING**

SEEING DOUBLE

A RISING HOLLYWOOD TREND IS SEEING HOLLYWOOD ACTORS CO-STAR WITH... THEMSELVES

TWO MICHAEL B. JORDANS!

SINNERS

Ryan Coogler loves working with his *Creed* lead so much, he has him playing identical twin brothers in this Jim Crow-era-set vampire horror. Their seventh collaboration sees Jordan's Elijah and Elias Smoke battling violent bloodsuckers in their hometown. At least we know one of them can throw a punch.

TWO ROBERT DE NIROS!

THE ALTO KNIGHTS

You'd have thought the *GoodFellas* star had exhausted the gangster genre over his 60-year career, and yet here he is playing a pair of them in Barry Levinson's Mob drama. The actor stars as the real-life heads of rival crime families, proving that the only person capable of defeating De Niro onscreen is another De Niro.

18 ROBERT PATTINSONS!

MICKEY 17

R-Patz's disposable clone racks up a hell of a body count, reprinting every time he dies, which tallies up to, well, 17 Mickeys. Yet when Mickey #18 pops up before his predecessor carks it, we get double Pattinson, much to the chagrin of his capitalist overlords and Team Jacob. **HARRY STAINER**

IN MEMORIAM

The genius of Gene

IN LATE FEBRUARY, A SCREEN TITAN LEFT US. CHRIS HEWITT, ONE OF THE LAST TO INTERVIEW GENE HACKMAN, PAYS TRIBUTE TO HIS LEGACY

SINCE HE RETIRED from acting in 2004, there hadn't been much news about Gene Hackman. The Oscar-winning star behind some of the most iconic film performances of all time preferred to stay in his house in Santa Fe, watching stand-up comedy (he was a big fan of Eddie Izzard) and occasionally going out for a ride on his electric bicycle. Then, just as we were sending this issue of *Empire* to the printers, tragic news broke: Hackman and his wife, Betsy Arakawa, were found dead at home. At the time of writing, the exact circumstances were yet to be divulged, but the news sent a seismic shockwave around the world. One of the true acting greats was gone.

Back in 2009, I was one of the last people to interview Hackman. Ostensibly, I was there to ask him about his post-acting career shift to writing, Hackman having authored (along with Daniel Lenihan) Civil War-set adventure *Escape From Andersonville* the year before. I'd been told that he was reluctant to discuss acting, and so spent the majority of our time talking about writing, and his interest in history. Gradually, though, we did phase into talking about his screen work, and the similarities with writing; about how he once tried to write the screenplay for an adaptation of *The Silence Of The Lambs*, with a view to not only directing but starring as Hannibal Lecter ("I didn't have the experience to do that kind of thing at that point"); and about that decision to retire, brought on by medical advice. Along the way we touched on his love of Kurosawa and Mifune, about Westerns, about doing research for *Scarecrow*, one of his best movies, hanging out with Al Pacino. "We spent about a week in San Francisco," he said, "just hanging out in the Tenderloin area... that was kinda fun."

This may not come as a huge revelation, but Gene Hackman sounded exactly like Gene Hackman. That gruff voice, that throaty chuckle, that sense of keen intelligence that he brought to all his roles. He had a reputation for not always being easy to work with (ask Wes Anderson or Sam Raimi for details), or suffering fools gladly. But the work that emerged was undeniably transcendent.

There was the splenetic Popeye Doyle in *The French Connection*, the role that bagged Hackman his first Oscar, four years after a cracking supporting turn in *Bonnie And Clyde* put him on the map after years of plugging away with little reward. As chance would have it, that movie made Hackman a star at the same time as

Etienne George/Getty Images, Imago, Shutterstock

Clockwise from main: Gene Hackman on set of 1985's *Target*; Oscar-bound in *The French Connection* (1971); As *The Royal Tenenbaums*' (2001) irascible *paterfamilias*; Nailing Lex Luthor in *Superman* (1978); With Denzel Washington in *Crimson Tide* (1995); In *Mississippi Burning* (1988), alongside Willem Dafoe.

his former roommate, Dustin Hoffman, hit big with *The Graduate*. Like Hoffman, Hackman wasn't blessed with leading-man looks, but he had talent to burn, and plenty of pluck and spirit, and became not only a leading man, but a movie star big enough to headline *The Poseidon Adventure*, barking defiance at God before making the noblest of sacrifices.

When the Salkinds were looking for big names to buttress their big-budget take on *Superman*, and take some of the pressure off their no-name star, Christopher Reeve, they turned to two of the biggest names, and personalities, around: Marlon Brando as Superman's dad Jor-El, and Hackman as Lex Luthor, Superman's arch-enemy. To this day, Hackman's winking, wry turn remains, for many, the definitive Luthor, even if he had to be tricked into shaving off his moustache. A former member of the US Marine Corps, Hackman was a man who drew lines in the sand — when the Salkinds fired Richard Donner midway through *Superman II*, Hackman (like Brando) refused to complete the movie. Which is why you see a lot of Lex Luthor's back in that movie (that's a stand-in), and why he sometimes doesn't sound like himself (that's a soundalike).

Hackman was able to bring his character-actor chops to movie-star roles throughout his career, building a veritable army of flawed men, bullish and sometimes brutal. Men like Harry Caul, the diffident protagonist of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*, or his conflicted private eye Harry Moseby in *Night Moves*, or the stubborn submarine commander going toe-to-toe with Denzel Washington in *Crimson Tide*. And then, of course, there was the second Oscar for his chilling turn as Little Bill Daggett in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*. Deserve had something to do with it that night.

He could be funny as well, showing off comedic chops in the likes of *Young Frankenstein*, *Get Shorty*, and *The Birdcage*, while in the underseen *Heartbreakers* he went full W.C. Fields, and it was a delight. His last movie, *Welcome To Mooseport*, is a comedy, but it's perhaps best to focus on his performance as Royal Tenenbaum in *The Royal Tenenbaums* when remembering how incredible Hackman could be in a role designed to make you laugh ("I'm very sorry for your loss. Your mother was a terribly attractive woman") and cry (his understated "I know you have, Chassie" to Ben Stiller is one for the ages).

For me, he was, simply, the greatest to ever do it. On the day I spoke to him, I finished off by asking if Hollywood had been in touch since his decision to retire. "I would guess that they've moved on!" he laughed, deploying that trademark chuckle. "That's a shame," I said. Hackman replied with another chuckle. "I don't think so," he said. Which is about the most Gene Hackman reaction possible. No nonsense, straight to the point, free from fluff. Much like his incredible, indelible career.

Dial meme for murder

HOW CHRISTOPHER LANDON AND MEGHANN FAHY PULLED OFF APP-BASED THRILLER DROP

WORDS **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

EVER HEARD THE theory that smartphones have ruined dating? Well, director Christopher Landon has, and takes it one step further with *Drop*, a tense conceptual thriller about a rendezvous sabotaged by a meme-loving assailant. Landon and star Meghann Fahy tell *Empire* how they turned shared files into shredded nerves.

THE MEET CUTE

Landon was on board as soon as he read the first draft of *Drop*, from horror screenwriters Jillian Jacobs and Christopher Roach. The story takes place over one night, and sees Fahy's single mum Violet go on a tentative first date with Henry (Brandon Sklenar). Things quickly take a terrifying turn when a stranger starts AirDropping threatening memes and messages to her phone, threatening her son, and instructing her to murder Henry without telling anyone what's going on. A writer himself (having penned other high-concept frighteners *Freaky* and *Happy Death Day 2U*), Landon worked with the writers to get *Drop* over the line. "The third act was very different," he explains. I saw an opportunity to do something else that would be more exciting and satisfying. A lot of it was just about pushing Violet's emotional arc." When the script reached Fahy, she couldn't put it down: "I just needed to know what was going to happen."

GETTING SERIOUS

Violet is in virtually every frame of *Drop*, but because of the film's single-night set-up, getting into character required Fahy and Landon to flesh out her backstory as much as possible. "We spoke about Violet being a survivor of domestic abuse," Fahy explains. "I've learned, in some cases, that people who've been through that get skilled at making things seem fine, and putting on a face for the rest of the world. It makes Violet uniquely prepared for this situation." Getting into Violet's stressed-out headspace day after day proved a challenge. "I definitely struggled to keep the panic level high," remembers Fahy. "Your body doesn't know the difference between what's real and what you're conjuring within yourself."

Top to bottom: Violet (Meghann Fahy) gets more than she bargained for on her date; Fahy on set with director Christopher Landon; Events take a turn for the worse.

THE NEXT STEP

Most of *Drop* happens in the fancy, high-rise dining location of Violet and Henry's date — and so Landon and production designer Susie Cullen developed a fully-functioning restaurant set complete with hundreds of extras and real food. "There was something very immersive about it," Fahy recalls. With such a detailed set-up, Landon wanted Violet's phone to drive the plot but without having her too glued to the screen. "Early in the film, we stop looking at her phone entirely," he explains. "We employed a visual style that keeps this conversation very much alive in the movie. You almost forget she's dealing with a phone at all, and it starts to feel like something inside of her head." This proved crucial in keeping up the film's fast pace, a key part of Landon's vision. "It's an hour-and-a-half and moves like a freight train, and that's what I wanted. Those are the thrillers I love, when you can't catch your breath — and that's what I think we have." Sounds like a sure-fire swipe right.

***DROP* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 11 APRIL**

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THE MONTHLY MIXTAPE

EMPIRE MIXMASTER AMON WARMANN SELECTS THIS MONTH'S ESSENTIAL TUNES

'NOTHING'S GONNA STOP US NOW'
STARSHIP

THUNDERBOLTS* TRAILER

The MCU's new misfits superteam get their own anthem with this '80s classic. Nothing says 'you're stronger together' than a synth-pop power ballad.

'WAITING ON A WISH'
RACHEL ZEGLER

SNOW WHITE

Fuelled by Zegler's impressively elastic vocals, this Broadway-style original new song communicates Snow White's yearning for self-discovery.

'TEST DRIVE'
JOHN POWELL

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON

A return trip to Berk wouldn't be the same without Powell's much-loved score, and this adrenaline-inducing theme for Hiccup and Toothless' first flight remains a hummable treat.

'DON'T STOP BELIEVIN''
JOURNEY

THE ELECTRIC STATE

An orchestral reworking of Journey's rousing resurfaced hit inspires some likeably plucky robots into action in the Russo Brothers' retro-futuristic sci-fi adventure.

'HOME'
GINTS ZILBALODIS AND RIHARDS ZALUPE

FLOW

Filmmaker Zilbalodis wrote the music for this wordless, gorgeously animated feature. This entry in particular atmospherically combines melodic percussion with soaring strings.

LISTEN NOW! HEAD TO THE *EMPIRE* SPOTIFY ACCOUNT TO HEAR ALL OF THE ABOVE

HOLLYWOOD FOLLOWS THE FOLLOWERS

FOR ACTORS TODAY, SOCIAL MEDIA HAS BECOME A SURVIVAL TOOL

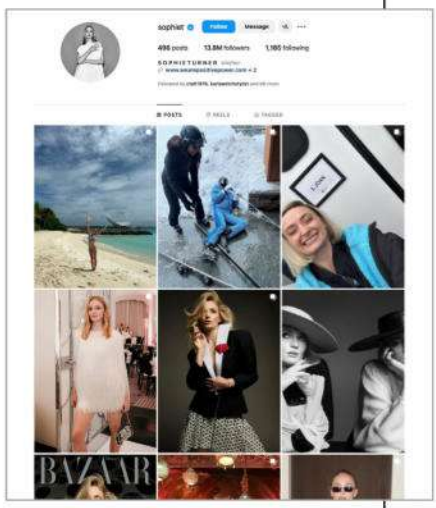
FOR SOME ACTORS, a social-media presence is a choice. "I like that people don't know my business. I just fundamentally believe that they don't need to," Saoirse Ronan has said of her online absence. For others, however, accruing and maintaining a robust Instagram or TikTok following is not just helpful to their careers; it's essential.

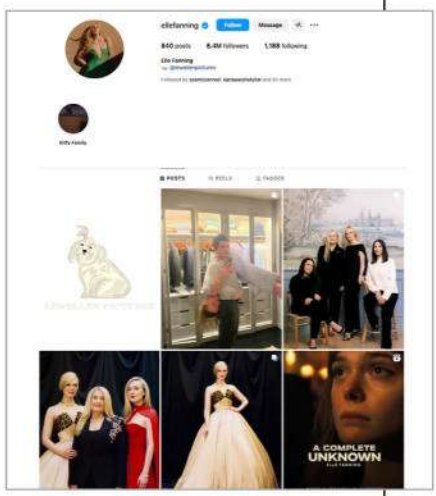
It's a grievance that Maya Hawke recently aired on the *Happy Sad Confused* podcast, after it became apparent that despite her wishes, scrubbing her Instagram profile and its 8.9 million fans was not an option. "I'm talking [to directors] about how I'm going to delete my Instagram, and they're like, 'Just so you know, when I'm casting a movie, with some producers, they hand me a sheet with the amount of collective followers I have to get of the cast that I cast,'" she said. "'So if you delete your Instagram, and I lose those followers, understand that these are the kinds of people that I need to cast around you.'"

Her father Ethan Hawke brought up the subject again days later at the Berlin Film Festival, summarising: "So if I don't have this public-facing [platform], I don't have a career? And if I get more followers I might get that part? What?!" Indeed, there have been very real, high-profile instances of this happening: in 2023 Elle Fanning confirmed that she lost out on a role in a major franchise because the studio believed that her social media wasn't sufficient enough (her Instagram following today stands at 6.4 million).

Sophie Turner, meanwhile, landed a job because of the size of her online profile, bolstered by her time on *Game Of Thrones* (she currently has 13.8 million Instagram followers). Some even speculated that she got the role that Fanning was gunning for. "It was between me and another girl who is a far better actress than I am, but I had the followers, so I got the job," she said in 2017. "It's not right, but it is part of the movie industry now."

It all casts a dark shadow over actors' rights to a private life, while also calling into question who we could see scoring major roles moving forward, as the significance of social media continues to swell. Could we see MrBeast as the next Bond? Or a TikTok star become the next Tom Cruise? When it comes to the film industry, influencers could be the future. Time to charge up your ring light. **LAURA VENNING**





Top to bottom: Sophie Turner's Instagram; Elle Fanning has significantly fewer followers; Maya Hawke would prefer to not even be on Instagram.

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How Much Is A Pint Of Milk?

Kathryn Hahn

THE STAR OF *THE STUDIO* ON EXTRATERRESTRIALS AND EXTORTIONATE DAIRY

WORDS **OLLY RICHARDS**

ARNO

What one thing do you do better than anyone else you know?
Organise drawers. I'm really, really good. If you have a junk drawer — like the drawer in a kitchen with everything in it — I'm so good at organising that. It gives me a lot of pleasure. You just need a good podcast, some patience and those little [dividers].

When were you most starstruck?
When I was in high school, my dad had an office building and he'd rent out the basement. The Rolling Stones came to shoot a video there for their *Steel Wheels* album, I think. We were lurking in the basement and we could see Mick Jagger, but only from the knees down. It was never quite confirmed that it was Mick Jagger, but I choose to believe it was.

What was your role in your first-ever school play?
I played Psalty [in] the *Singing Songbook*. I was in kindergarten. It was a one-night-only performance. Sorry, not one night — it was kindergarten — one Sunday. I came out dressed in a cardboard box, essentially, and that was my introduction to the boards. Never looked back. There's been a little bit of Psalty in everything I've done since.

How much is a pint of milk?
I'm going to say $2.99 and it should be much more. (*On being told the actual price*) I'm gonna throw up. I don't think we should be drinking anything from an animal that's that inexpensive.

What's the worst thing you've ever eaten?
When I was a kid, I stayed at a friend's house overnight and someone made me something called a 'purple cow', which is grape juice and milk. It was as vile as it sounds. I had to say something like, "I don't think my mom would let me drink this," to try to get out of it.

Which movie have you seen more than any other?
E.T.. I've seen it through many different phases of my life, from being a kid to being a mother, and I cry more every time. I remember watching it for the first time in a movie theatre and seeing my mom cry watching it. I thought, "Why?" I think it was because my brother was wearing a red hoodie, like Elliott. It's everything you want in a movie.

What is your most irrational fear?
An animal under your covers. Like a rat or an enormous bug. Anything bigger than a palm. I just remember hearing stories of people waking up to a rodent staring at them or crawling across their body and that's absolutely horrifying.

Do you have any tattoos?
Yes, I have three moon phases, which I got when I was 18 and on one of my first dates with my husband. I got them because I had $50 and they were what I could afford. I literally just asked the guy what I could afford and he said, "Eh, this?" One on my ankle. One on my hip bone. One on my back. Yeah, they're spread around. I wanted maximum bang for my buck!

If you weren't an actor, what job would you do?
I would love to be on a farm. I say that, but I wonder if the day-to-day would be as romantic as I'm imagining. I would like a lot of land, a garden and some animals.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?
"When in doubt, don't." From my mom. Have I always used that advice? No. I like to waffle around indecision for as long as possible.

What's your go-to comfort watch?
Broadchurch! I know it sounds bananas, but I want to be in that cosy coastal town. I want to hang out with Olivia Colman and David Tennant. Yes, there's the murder, but it's still very cosy.

What would be the name of your autobiography?
It would be called 'Passing The Clap' and it would be me on the cover in a black turtleneck. 'Passing the clap' is a theatre term, but it also sounds like something else and I think that's funny.

***THE STUDIO* IS ON APPLE TV+ FROM 26 MARCH**

reviews

FILMS, TV, BOOKS, GAMES — ALL THE BIG RELEASES, RATED

13 MARCH - 9 APRIL 2025 | EDITED BY **JOHN NUGENT**

★★★★★ EXCELLENT
★★★★ STRONG
★★★ GOOD
★★ WEAK
★ YIKES

Cat Grylls.

Top to bottom: The boat heads into an uncertain future; Shared space: the lemur and the capybara; The secretary bird casts its wise eye over the dopey golden retriever.

WATCH FIRST

Director Gints Zilbalodis partly based the film on a seven-minute animated short titled *Aqua*, which he made as a 15-year-old in high school. That short cut can now be watched on YouTube.

FILM

FLOW

A CAT, A DOG AND A CAPYBARA WALK INTO A BAR...

★★★★★

OUT **21 MARCH** / **85 MINS** / CERT **U**

DIRECTOR Gints Zilbalodis

PLOT A cat is forced to flee its quiet home in the woods when flood waters begin to rise. Finding refuge on a boat, it must learn to co-operate with other animals.

STOP US IF you think you've heard this one before. In a new family-friendly animated film, a gang of cute animals must overcome obstacles to learn the true meaning of friendship. Sound familiar? On its watery surface, *Flow* seems to take the form of ghosts of animated past — and yet, there is really nothing quite like it. Made on a shoestring budget by a tiny team in Latvia, Belgium and France, led by multi-talented filmmaker Gints Zilbalodis (whose 2019 feature debut, *Away*, was similarly awe-inspiring and philosophical), this is a spectacular, singular slice of computer-generated cinema — doing things only animation can do.

In its scope and vision, *Flow* feels both maximalist (Zilbalodis conjures vast oceans and mysterious skyscraping temples) and minimalist: there is zero dialogue, beyond various animal grunts, baked inside a fiercely simple story. Our hero is a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed house cat, who seems to live a quiet, solitary life in the apparent home of a feline-loving human artist. But the humans are inexplicably nowhere to be seen, their fingerprints seemingly only on the edges of the frame, the animals left to their own devices.

When an unstoppable rising tsunami — from where? — suddenly envelops the known world, the cat finds sanctuary in a rickety sailboat, where it improbably joins a small menagerie of animals: a goofy, puppyish golden retriever, a covetous lemur, a stately secretary bird, and a calm, centred capybara. If there's one thing a cat hates more than water, it is dogs, but somehow, together, this mismatched gang are forced to navigate an unpredictable aquatic apocalypse: like *2012*, but with more barking and squawking.

If that sounds like same-old-same-old, well, it is decidedly not. This film is very much its own beast. The aesthetic, for example, is so unusual that it may take your eyes a little initial adjustment, the animation produced entirely on the free-to-use open-source software Blender. The handsome golden-hour backdrops — Zilbalodis has a Miyazakian eye for the natural world, and shares that director's love of cats — and scrappy, lightly pixelated brushstroke design evoke the textures of video games; *Breath Of The Wild*, *Ico*, and *Abzû* all feel like near-cousins. Yet its composition and craft is exceptionally cinematic.

Some of the approach here is fantastical and fabular — a kind of mythical leviathan seems to stalk the waters, and there is nothing especially realistic about animals steering a boat — and yet the character animation grounds it all. Unlike the cartoon creatures we're used to seeing — walking on their hind legs, talking with celebrity voices — this is one of the few animated films to take a serious study of animal movements, a fealty to biology. They act and move and behave as animals would. They are impetuous, instinctual, driven by fight-or-flight. The dog likes to wee on things. The cat licks its own genitals. But the great magic trick here is that we still care so deeply for them, despite it not following the usual animation rules. We feel their tension, we worry for them, we cheer their wins, we mourn their losses.

There is in fact great loss in this film. The fact that the animal characters are unable to adequately express or articulate that loss only makes it sadder: theirs is a childlike impotence, against forces they neither understand nor have any power to stop. Zilbalodis also serves as co-composer, his brooding and minimalistic score (like something by Philip Glass or Max Richter) establishing a strangely sad, pensive tone.

Death and disquiet haunt these simple creatures. In one extraordinary sequence, a beloved character seems to transcend the mortal plane; in another, the cat has a vivid dream of a deer cyclone, their stampeding hooves a portent of something darker. As an entry in the ever-growing apocalyptic canon, it feels like an apt reflection of our anxious times, a modern retelling of the ancient flood myths, and the film's constantly rising sea levels nod to some version of our own future where the climate crisis is left ignored. (A boat suspended in a tree in an early scene suggests a world already in ecological turmoil.)

But Zilbalodis seems careful not to lay any message on thick, and the fact that this natural disaster is never explained chimes with the innocence and ignorance of his furry heroes. This is ultimately a film about collaboration and community, and the collaboration between the talented artists behind it is about as good an example as there has ever been of the power of animation. If you care about creatures without a single word of dialogue being spoken, they've done their job. And then some.

JOHN NUGENT

VERDICT **A mesmerising, wondrous example of animation's potential; a thoughtful allegory about ecocide and death; and an adorable ode to four-legged (and two-legged) friends. No ebbs here: *Flow* is the real deal.**

Roger (Jesse Plemons) and George (Robert De Niro) are in for a bumpy ride. **Below:** George and Chief Of Staff Valerie (Connie Britton).

TV

ZERO DAY

DE NIRO TAKES TO DE SMALL SCREEN

★★★★

OUT **NOW** (**NETFLIX**) / EPISODES VIEWED **6 OF 6**

SHOWRUNNERS Eric Newman, Noah Oppenheim
CAST Robert De Niro, Jesse Plemons, Connie Britton, Lizzy Caplan, Dan Stevens, Matthew Modine, Angela Bassett

PLOT After a massive cyberattack causes devastation across America, former President George Mullen (De Niro) is put in charge of finding the perpetrators.

TV SHOWS DON'T get much more timely than *Zero Day*. The title refers to a cyberattack that hits the entire US for one solid minute, turning off power supplies everywhere, and showing an ominous message on every smartphone in the country — "This will happen again." Cars crash, planes fall, hospital equipment fails. Many people die. It's an attack on an unprecedented scale, which leads to an unprecedented reaction — the Zero Day Commission, set up by serving President Evelyn Mitchell (Angela Bassett) to find the culprits through any means necessary.

Heading up that commission is a very big job indeed — as a certain uncle once said, "With great power comes great responsibility." That power is given to former President George Mullen (Robert De Niro), a man much admired by the country for his morality and previous bipartisan appeal, but currently struggling to write his memoir due to some buried-deep family secrets, and experiencing some strange symptoms that lead to questions about the soundness of his mind.

De Niro is impressive as Mullen, small in stature but always commanding respect, the actor channelling his decades of screen experience into playing someone who holds the fate of the country in his hands. Not always the most expressive, he's best when given plenty to say — in conflict with his daughter, or testifying in front of Congress. He's surrounded by tons of on-screen talent — Jesse Plemons is slimy yet likeable as his right-hand man Roger; Lizzy Caplan is as engaging as ever as daughter Alex; Connie Britton is quietly steely as Chief Of Staff Valerie; Dan Stevens chews up the scenery, on excellent form as unbearable TV pundit Evan Green; and Gaby Hoffman convinces as a tech billionaire using her platforms to exert influence over the government (sound familiar?).

The whole plot, whilst heightened, feels authentic to an extent — that it's co-written by Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* journalist Michael Schmidt comes through — and is only occasionally distracted by melodrama (a thread involving a secret neurological weapon from the CIA is the least effective). There are grown-up themes at play here — freedom, ageing, grief, reputation, trusting your instincts. It asks, repeatedly: what kinds of ends justify terrible means?

Zero Day's biggest stumble is in its pacing: it starts strong with the initial attack, but loses tension and interest around the halfway mark, the script groaning as it sends Mullen down some wrong roads and delays its big reveal. But once the truth starts unravelling, the show kicks back up a notch, and the last two instalments are truly nail-biting. **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

VERDICT **Handsomely made, politically prescient and packing some serious star power, *Zero Day* makes up for a meandering middle with two properly thrilling final episodes.**

TV

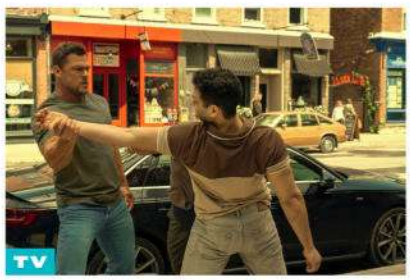
YELLOWJACKETS: SEASON 3

★★★★

OUT **NOW** (**PARAMOUNT+**) / EPISODES VIEWED **4 OF 10**

SHOWRUNNERS Ashley Lyle, Bart Nickerson, Jonathan Lisco
CAST Melanie Lynskey, Christina Ricci, Sophie Thatcher, Sophie Nélisse, Tawny Cypress

Things are looking up for the teenage plane-crash-survivors turned reformed cannibals in this latest run of the time-hopping show. In 1998, the gang are now thriving; in 2021, some semblance of normalcy is found. But the calm is short-lived. Giving the present-day characters a break from their shared turmoil leads to sincerely lovely moments that increase our affection for each of the remaining crew, and Sophie Nélisse proves the MVP of the wilderness cast. Things start slow, but all the ingredients that make *Yellowjackets* special are there — banging '90s indie-rock, grisly plot twists, and complicated women. **LL**



TV

REACHER: SEASON 3

★★★

OUT **NOW** (**PRIME VIDEO**) / EPISODES VIEWED **8 OF 8**

SHOWRUNNER Nick Santora
CAST Alan Ritchson, Maria Sten, Anthony Michael Hall, Olivier Richters, Sonya Cassidy

Three seasons into *Reacher*, you know exactly what you're getting from Prime Video's version of Lee Child's crimefighting giant. Based on the seventh *Reacher* novel, *Persuader*, this tale finds Alan Ritchson's titular hero pulling double duty, working undercover for the DEA to rescue an informant while also looking to settle an old score. It's all entertaining but workmanlike, and moments of inspiration are too few and far between. Still, the televisual escape *Reacher* offers — watching a hyper-competent man with a righteous moral compass taking justice into his own brawny hands and setting the world straight — is more comforting than ever. **AW**

Miles Teller and Anya Taylor-Joy as chasm-crossed lovers.

FILM

THE GORGE

A HOLE NEW KIND OF ROMANCE

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **127 MINS**

DIRECTOR Scott Derrickson
CAST Miles Teller, Anya Taylor-Joy, Sigourney Weaver, Ṣọpẹ́ Dìrísù, James Marlowe

PLOT Two hawk-eyed snipers (Teller and Taylor-Joy) are hired to guard a mysterious, misty gorge. Together, they fight the creatures that lurk below, and discover the secret of this massive crack.

THE TITLE OF this movie is the two-word answer to a most unexpected question. Namely: "What do you get if you cross *American Sniper*, *The Last Of Us*, *Stranger Things*, *Aliens* and *Love Actually*?" Writer Zach Dean (*The Tomorrow War*, *Fast X*) appears unashamed of his influences on this former Black List spec script, and director Scott Derrickson (*Doctor Strange*, *The Black Phone*) has much fun with them, serving up a frothy B-pic stew. By the time we reach the wink-at-the-audience montage that depicts Miles '*Whiplash*' Teller and *The Queen's Gambit's* Anya Taylor-Joy bonding over drumming and chess, there is no doubt left that *The Gorge* can't, and shouldn't, be taken too seriously.

The set-up is a doozy. Teller and Taylor-Joy are sexy-but-damaged elite operatives (American and Lithuanian, respectively) whisked to a super-remote, top-secret location by Sigourney Weaver, guest-starring as the token untrustworthy boss-person. Their year-long mission? To stand sentinel over an eerie chasm which may or may not be "the door to hell". Only, they're on different sides (literally), sequestered in opposing watchtowers and, for some reason, forbidden to communicate.

Predictably, it's not long before they break the rules and start flirting via hand-scrawled signs and friendly fire. And it's no surprise when their shared mission goes south and they ultimately plummet through the gorge's thick mists into an Upside Down-ish nether-realm of nasties.

The action-horror elements are solidly squealy (skull-spiders!), if beset by not-quite-there CGI and a rather underwhelming revelation about the gorge itself. Along the way, Dean's script suffers the occasional clunk and clang: after narrowly surviving an extended monstrous encounter, Taylor-Joy sighs and says, "That was so surreal." Ya think?! But still, like we said: not to be taken too seriously.

What's most impressive — aside from a cool, synthy Trent Reznor/Atticus Ross score — is the way Dean and Derrickson firmly pitch *The Gorge* as a romance; that Valentine's Day drop-date on Apple TV+ is no accident. In other films, the separated-snipers concept would be the start of a duel or rivalry. Here it is a meet-cute, with Taylor-Joy and Teller forming a firm double act via a very different kind of long-distance relationship, which plays out unhurriedly and surprisingly sweetly. Their *amour* is endearing, underpinning the CG-creature silliness with some unapologetic heart (there's even some love poetry), and making you root for them to blast their way out of this entertaining nightmare and earn a happy ending together. At least until some other shadowy paymaster finds the couple a different supernaturally plagued geological feature to babysit. 'The Butte', anyone? **DAN JOLIN**

VERDICT **The spirit of the drive-in is strong in this trashy mash-up, though it's best appreciated as an unlikely romance, where love and poetry somehow blossom amid heavy gunfire and monster rampages.**

Is it a bird...? Anthony Mackie prepares for take-off.

FILM

CAPTAIN AMERICA: BRAVE NEW WORLD

ANTHONY MACKIE STEPS INTO THE STARS AND STRIPES

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **12A** / **118 MINS**

DIRECTOR Julius Onah
CAST Anthony Mackie, Harrison Ford, Danny Ramirez, Shira Haas, Giancarlo Esposito, Carl Lumbly, Xosha Roquemore

PLOT An assassination attempt on US President Ross (Ford) throws new Captain America Sam Wilson (Mackie) into a conspiracy he must unravel to save his friends, himself and maybe the world.

MARVEL HAS NOT always been successful when its supporting characters have stepped up to lead roles: even in *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier*, Anthony Mackie and Sebastian Stan's charisma and chemistry were hamstrung by a messy script and shifting priorities. The good news is that, in his first official outing as Captain America, Mackie has a far stronger and more focused story to work with.

A standard opening mission runs into serious opposition from ruthless new bad guy Sidewinder (Giancarlo Esposito). But the real trouble begins when Sam Wilson, wannabe new Falcon Joaquin Torres (Danny Ramirez) and their friend Isaiah Bradley (Carl Lumbly), a recipient of the super-soldier serum who was betrayed and imprisoned by the US government for decades, attend a White House reception in recognition of their heroism. There, a genuinely shocking attempt on the President's life leaves Bradley back in prison and Wilson desperate to save his name. Of course, it emerges there's far more at stake than one life, and there are shadowy figures behind the scenes to uncover before they enact their dastardly plots.

So far, so business as usual for Marvel — and this film does occasionally suffer from a feeling that it's trying to follow a formula, as well as sometimes struggling to hit its comic beats and one-liners just right. Oh look! Here's another quick action scene; there's an inspiring pep talk; over there, a big, destructive showdown. What holds it together is Mackie, standing on shifting sands and trying to figure out what it means to be Captain America in a world where his country is not quite the shining city on a hill that it aspired to be.

Harrison Ford's President Ross — a man with an established suspicion and dislike of "enhanced individuals" — asks the new Cap to work with him, and Wilson can't figure out if this is a shot at redeeming everything he once stood for, or a trap to prevent him from doing the right thing. Ross doesn't seem to know either. The film begins with his election, and hammers home the pain he feels at his estrangement from his daughter Betty (Liv Tyler from 2008's *The Incredible Hulk*) to justify his attempted change of heart. Quite how big a change is of course visible in the film's trailer and poster, a major self-own from the usually spoiler-phobic studio given how late in the movie the Red Hulk appears.

Tim Blake Nelson's Samuel Sterns, as promised, shows up as the Leader, looking effectively terrifying when he's in shadow and mostly just unpleasant in daylight. The design aesthetic overall is patchy: Cap's new suit is a major upgrade, but the Falcon looks like a lost Mandalorian and Shira Haas' formidable Ruth Bat-Seraph mostly keeps a biker jacket over her super-threads.

KEEP 'EM PEELED

Look out for sculptor Sabin Howard's emotive bronze World War II memorial behind Carl Lumbly's Isaiah Bradley as he's arrested, fittingly named 'A Soldier's Journey'.

Top to bottom: Impressive line-up: Takehiro Hira, Anthony Mackie and Harrison Ford; President Ross sees red; Cap senses something is afoot.

The emotion of the film is more reliable. Ross is trying to be a better man, while Wilson tries to figure out if being a good man is enough, or if you need super-soldier serum-enhanced strength and speed to call yourself Captain America: the same question many in the audience have been asking since he was bequeathed the shield. A spectacular mid-air battle hangs on Wilson's ability to keep the peace rather than make war, and that speaks eloquently, even when the dialogue scenes feel stilted. Moreover, by emphasising Wilson's history as a counsellor of veterans, and his ability to form relationships, both as a mentor (to Joaquin) and mentee (of Isaiah), director Julius Onah makes a strong case that it's Wilson's compassion that makes him the right Cap, and that Batman levels of training can take care of the rest.

For a film that was, by all accounts, retooled more than most Marvels in its reshoots, the plot feels remarkably coherent and speeds along nicely. But it's sometimes so busy getting us to the next action scene that it neglects to be as strong a thriller as it could be, abandoning the mystery element of what's going on pretty quickly in favour of setting up more traditional villainy. That said, relying on Mackie's easy charm, Ford's history and Marvel's sense of scale isn't a terrible move. If it isn't quite up to the standard of *The Winter Soldier*, it offers the same reminder that good people can fight for America even when their government falls short. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT Pacy and punchy, this is a promising first official outing for the new Captain America, even if some awkward moments hold it back from greatness.

Ayo Edebiri amid the creepy goings-on. **Below:** A reassuringly wacky John Malkovich addresses the crowd.

FILM

OPUS

POP MUSIC WILL EAT ITSELF IN THIS NEW SOCIAL THRILLER

★★★

OUT **14 MARCH** / CERT **TBC** / **103 MINS**

DIRECTOR Mark Anthony Green
CAST Ayo Edebiri, John Malkovich, Juliette Lewis, Murray Bartlett, Amber Midthunder, Tony Hale

PLOT A young music journalist (Edebiri) visits the remote home of an enigmatic pop star (Malkovich). It soon becomes clear he has bigger plans than revealing his new album.

"YOUR PROBLEM," one character says to Ayo Edebiri's Ariel Ecton in an early scene of *Opus*, "is that you're middle." Alas, in a cruel irony, while *Opus* has some strong stuff to recommend it, it never quite rises above middle-of-the-pack. Perhaps if it had been released ten years earlier, it might have at least felt a little bit fresher, having the misfortune of following eerily similar 'social thrillers' like *Get Out*, *Midsommar*, *The Menu*, *Blink Twice*, *Don't Worry Darling* et al. There's some fun to be had, but the plot — an unwitting protagonist visits a cult-like retreat, only to discover satirically sinister intentions — feels a little too well-trodden.

Our surrogate here is Edebiri's Ariel, a diligent rookie journalist at a glossy New York magazine, doomed to be belittled and passed over by her veteran editor Stan (Murray Bartlett). Suddenly, opportunity knocks. A personal invitation to a listening party arrives for the decades-in-the-making, long-awaited new album from reclusive pop star Alfred Moretti, played with entertaining loopiness by John Malkovich.

With mock modesty, Moretti describes himself as "a simple songman". In fact, 'Mr Glamboyant', as he is sometimes called, is ostentatious enough to make Bowie blush,

prone to wearing diamond-encrusted velvet suits and six-inch heels while offering pretentious pearls like, "Let the music decant a little" — dialogue that sings in Malkovich's uniquely theatrical diction.

Soon Ariel, her editor and a select group of journalists and influencers (a timely jab is made towards print media) make the lengthy journey to Moretti's compound, where they learn not only about his 18th studio album, 'Caesar's Request', but also the teachings of the 'Levellist' movement and its hundreds of acolytes. Ariel seems the only one who notices anything off — even after an act of extreme medieval violence.

First-time writer-director Mark Anthony Green, a former magazine journalist himself, cranks up the tension nicely enough, with some stylish visual choices and some lovely supporting turns (*Prey* breakout Amber Midthunder is silently, effectively creepy as a Levellist enforcer). Disappointingly, though, the film holds its cards close to its chest before anticlimactically splaying them all on the table.

The film's central thesis, too, feels muddled and underbaked: as a skewering of cult-like celebrity-worship, it's often contradictory; as a study of creativity, it's hardly very original. Still, it's encouraging to see Ayo Edebiri — humane and droll, as she always is — earn the lead roles she richly deserves; and it's always a treat to see Malkovich chew scenery with the subtlety of a smashed disco ball. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT All is very much what it seems from another one of these all-is-not-what-it-seems thrillers — but there are fun, enjoyably unhinged performances from Edebiri and Malkovich.

Here: Bossing it: Seth Rogen as studio mogul Matt Remick. **Below:** Matt has words with Ron Howard.

TV

THE STUDIO

OR, SETH ROGEN'S *THE PLAYER*

★★★★

OUT **26 MARCH (APPLE TV+)** / EPISODES VIEWED **10 OF 10**

SHOWRUNNERS Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg
CAST Seth Rogen, Catherine O'Hara, Kathryn Hahn, Ike Barinholtz, Chase Sui Wonders, Bryan Cranston

PLOT Hapless Hollywood exec Matt (Rogen) finds himself in the top job at Continental Studios, where he must deliver a billion-dollar blockbuster while not pissing off 'the talent'.

AS THE OLD adage goes, in Hollywood nobody knows anything. That seems to be even more the case in our hyper-caffeinated, multi-platform, AI-injected modern times: the Dream Factory out in LA seems more chaotic than ever. It's ripe timing, then, for Seth Rogen to impishly chuck a spanner into the cogs of that factory, spoofing the inherent daftness of the movie business with a witty, knowing and cameo-jammed ten-episode satire.

Rogen's Matt Remick may seem like an unlikely studio boss, riddled with insecurities and about as intimidating as a wet latte. But he turns out to be our perfect guide through this lunatic labyrinth, as he sets out repeatedly to create great art yet ends up, through both his own weaknesses and the pressures imposed on him, producing absolute crap. Episode 1 sets out the show's stall in rousing fashion, with Matt charged by his terrifying boss (an on-fire Bryan Cranston) with recreating the success of *Barbie* — "If Warner Bros. can make a billion fucking dollars off the plastic tits of a pussyless doll, we should be able to make two billion dollars off the legacy brand of Kool-Aid" — and managing to piss off a number of A-list players in the doing. By the time Martin Scorsese is sobbing in the arms of Charlize Theron, *The Studio* will likely have sucked you in.

Over the following episodes, Matt manages to derail a flashy one-shot masterminded by Sarah Polley, cross swords with Ron Howard, and receive a sub-zero dressing-down from Ice Cube. The show is at its best when it's targeting a topic that has a ring of painful truth: one hilarious storyline sees the hero and his inner circle of nitwits (Ike Barinholtz's smarmy suit, Chase Sui Wonders' ambitious young exec, Kathryn Hahn's walking-energy-drink marketing maven) tie themselves in knots over the racial make-up of one of their casts. There are a couple of episodes in the middle that feel like they're somewhat treading water, and only a throwaway mention of AI (surely bounteous plot-fodder for a show like this), but for the most part it's consistently funny and smart. And pleasingly, it all builds to a crescendo as Continental Studios takes its blighted slate to Las Vegas' Cinema-Con for a two-episode finale, featuring powerful narcotics, real-life entertainment journalist Matthew Belloni, and extremely game guest appearances from Zoë Kravitz and Dave Franco.

Entourage meets *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (funnily enough, Scorsese also played himself in both of those), it feels like *The Studio* could run and run. Rogen certainly has the contacts book to pull from. And given he manages to somehow wrangle a cameo from Netflix boss Ted Sarandos — for an Apple TV+ show! — there appear to be few limits constraining his mischief. **NICK DE SEMLYEN**

VERDICT **A fizzy, acidic send-up of movie-industry shenanigans, *The Studio* has a flat stretch or two, but is largely triumphantly funny, as Rogen chomps joyfully on the hand that feeds him.**

TV

THE WHITE LOTUS: SEASON 3

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / **SKY/NOW** / EPISODES WATCHED **6 OF 8**
SHOWRUNNER Mike White
CAST Jason Isaacs, Parker Posey, Walton Goggins, Aimee Lou Wood

As the bullet-strewn Season 2 finale of Mike White's anthology confirmed, nobody is safe, no matter how lovable the character. So when a new ensemble of guests check in to the White Lotus Thailand a week before an on-site fatality, the targets on theirs and the hotel staff's backs only bolster the season's unrelenting tension. Casting is always an event for this show, and Jason Isaacs and Parker Posey stand out as pill-popping parents, as does Aimee Lou Wood's grounded and likeable Mancunian free spirit. It takes a few episodes to gain momentum, but White's jamboree of misery plays to the strengths of its predecessors while keeping things fresh by going bigger, bolder and more ruthless than ever before. **BW**

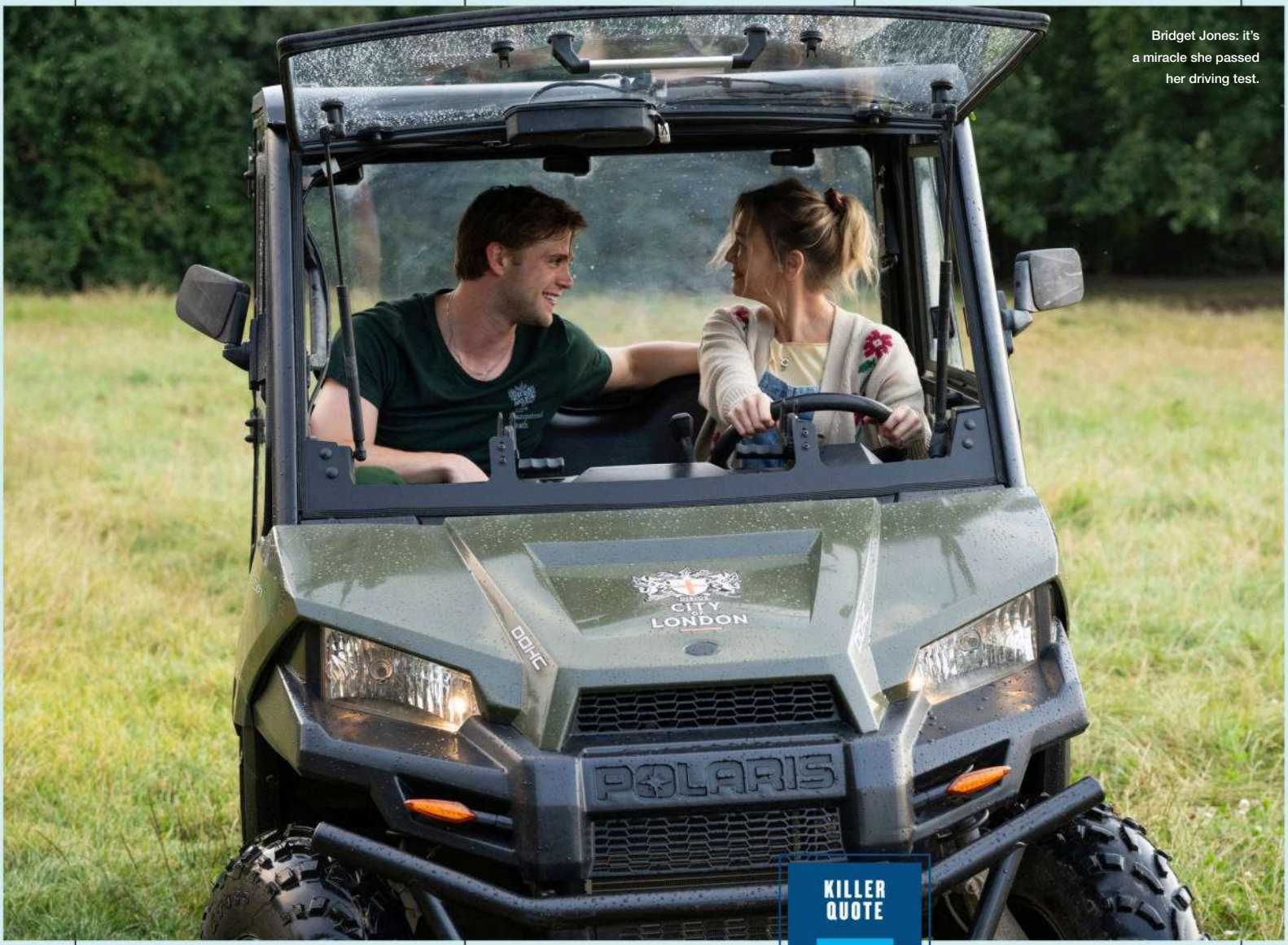
FILM

Y2K

★★

OUT **21 MARCH** / CERT **18** / **92 MINS**
DIRECTOR Kyle Mooney
CAST Jaeden Martell, Julian Dennison, Rachel Zegler, Fred Durst

A turn-of-the-millennium throwback that leans too heavily on nostalgia, *Y2K* is part romcom, part horror, and too unfocused to commit to either one. When introvert Eli (Jaeden Martell) finds himself at a party with best friend Danny (Julian Dennison) and popular tech wiz Laura (Rachel Zegler), all hell breaks loose via self-aware murder-bots assembled from household electronics. These tech monsters want all humans to conform, a theme that seldom connects to the movie's colourful characters, while Kyle Mooney doesn't find his directorial groove, assembling a haphazard film with flimsy set-ups and payoffs that come out of the blue. On the plus side, at least the hair and outfits are all period-accurate. **SA**



Bridget Jones: it's a miracle she passed her driving test.

FILM

BRIDGET JONES: MAD ABOUT THE BOY

THE BIG PANTS ARE BACK

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **125 MINS**

DIRECTOR Michael Morris
CAST Renée Zellweger, Hugh Grant, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Leo Woodall

PLOT A widowed Bridget Jones (Zellweger) opens herself up to love again while juggling the pressures of parenting and work.

OH, BRIDGET. EVER since she burst onto the scene, first in Helen Fielding's popular *Independent* newspaper column in 1995 and bestselling novel a year later, then on the big screen in 2001, Bridget Jones has earned her place in the pantheon of iconic British characters. The first film's script might have been co-written by romcom king Richard Curtis, but *Bridget Jones's Diary* offered an authentic female perspective on the trials and tribulations of finding love at the turn of the millennium. It was goodbye to lovesick, floppy-haired heroes, and hello to giant knickers and Marlboro Lights.

Twenty-four years and a few sequels later, in *Mad About The Boy*, we find Bridget living on the edge of Hampstead Heath in North London, with two children under ten years old. Beloved husband Mark Darcy (Colin Firth) has been dead for four years, killed in Sudan. Bridget has been resolutely single ever since, but, as old friend Shazzer (Sally Phillips) advises, the cure to her emotional stagnation is firstly going back to work, then getting laid again. Tinder toy boy Roxster (*One Day's* Leo Woodall) might be the one to relight her fire, but her children's severe science teacher, Mr Wallaker (Chiwetel Ejiofor), also starts to show his softer side.

The screenplay, written by Fielding, Abi Morgan (*Shame*, *Eric* and *The Split*) and, er, *Borat's* Dan Mazer, is missing some of the daft humour of the previous instalments, although Bridget does have a run-in with some dodgy lip-filler. But in swapping slapstick for sincerity, the film becomes a tender and perceptive depiction of discovering the potential for joy even while enduring such terrible grief. It's also refreshing to see an older woman as a mother and a sexual being, and there's no real judgement regarding her fling with a much younger man.

Even more unexpectedly, by far the most touching scenes are between Bridget and Hugh Grant's charming rogue, Daniel Cleaver. Absent since 2004's *Bridget Jones: The Edge Of Reason*, 'Uncle' Daniel is now babysitting Bridget's kids, as well as experiencing the loneliness of an ageing playboy, and he and Bridget find themselves aligned.

A few nods to the original film, like turquoise cocktails reminiscent of Bridget's blue-soup dinner party, are charming without being laboured. But strip away the cameos and the callbacks and you'll find a sweet, surprisingly mature story of an imperfect woman letting herself fall in love all over again. **LAURA VENNING**

KILLER QUOTE

"Tragic Widow Seeks Sexual Awakening"
BRIDGET'S DATING APP PROFILE

VERDICT ***Mad About The Boy*** **is a heartfelt, charming return to the chaos surrounding the one and only Bridget Jones. You might even shed a few tears.**

BOOKS

CINEMA HER WAY: VISIONARY FEMALE DIRECTORS IN THEIR OWN WORDS

SHE SAID, SHE SAID

★★★★

AUTHOR **MARYA E. GATES**

IT'S NO MEAN feat to gather a significant number of women directors to talk about their craft, because almost all are impossibly weary about being asked to opine endlessly about directing as women. How else are they going to direct? Immense credit, then, to Marya E. Gates, a film writer and interviewer, for getting so many to talk so openly about their work.

The result is 19 lengthy interviews with women working today and pioneers who led the way through the 1980s and 1990s. What emerges strikingly is the vast diversity of their experiences. The directors who have stuck exclusively to the independent sphere have generally made films that received barely any distribution and often remain hard to find, but they've done so on their own terms, and produced remarkably idiosyncratic work. The interviews from those women — including Josephine Decker and Bette Gordon — are heavy with ideas and theory.

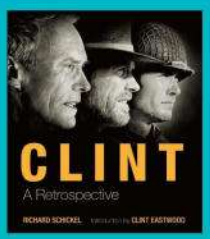
The directors closer to mainstream Hollywood, such as Jane Campion, are more accessible, as you might expect, and dwell longer on the practicalities and the process of filmmaking, though with the same emphasis on bringing their vision to the screen intact. It's particularly interesting to hear from someone like Filipino director Isabel Sandoval (known for 2019's *Lingua Franca*), who has such a strong individual style but also worked on network TV; or Julie Dash, who has seen her work — in particular 1991's *Daughters Of The Dust* — celebrated anew after decades of the Hollywood cold shoulder.

As is characteristic of women directors, few complain about sexism out loud; Cheryl Dunye (1996's *The Watermelon Woman*) is the only one to use the word. But read carefully and there are signs that it has affected many of these women. There are the directors who made successful films but were not invited back for the sequel. The directors who waited five, ten or more years for their next production after a hit. Two of these women were in the running for the same Netflix Christmas movie, despite little in their previous filmographies pointing to an inclination in that direction. All of these things say something bleak about the state of opportunities for female directors even now.

Perhaps we should be glad they're even hiring women for those movies, but it's at most a baby step. The vision, tenacity and talent of just the small group assembled in this book shows how much filmmaking possibility the studios are leaving on the table. **HELEN O'HARA**

Jane Campion sits and surveys her epic set for *The Power Of The Dog*.

VERDICT A fascinating snapshot of the state of the profession for women right now, and a sign of how much more work is needed to open the directorial doors.



CLINT EASTWOOD: A RETROSPECTIVE

★★★★

AUTHOR **RICHARD SCHICKEL**

This exhaustive history of the Man With No Name was originally written by Richard Schickel, a prolific film historian and author, back in 1996. This updated edition, with new entries from film critic Clarisse Loughrey, takes us right up to last year's possible swansong, *Juror #2*. It's appropriately rigorous, methodical and definitive on an extraordinary career. **JN**

THE THIRD MAN: THE OFFICIAL STORY OF THE FILM

★★★★

AUTHOR **JOHN WALSH**

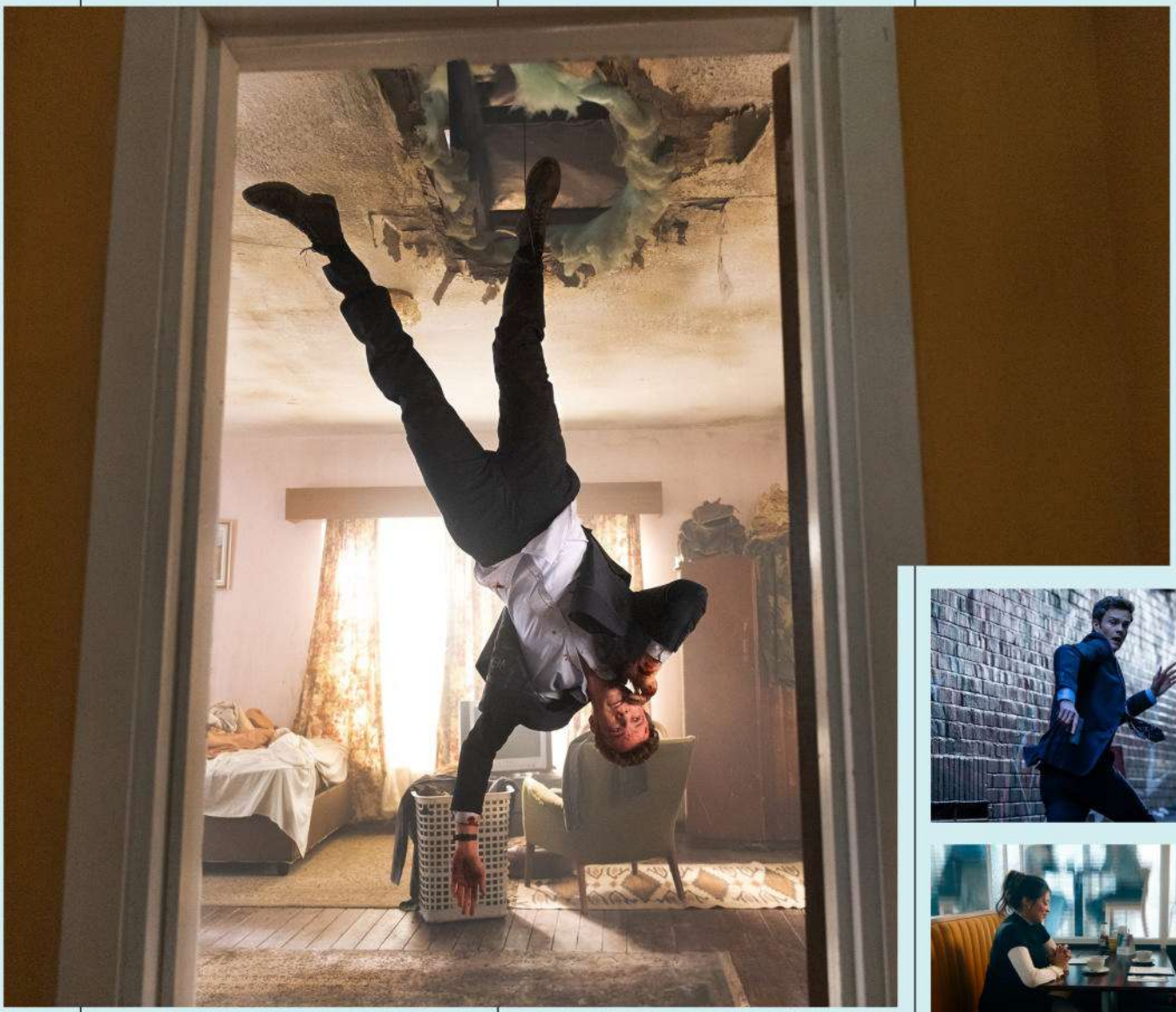
Published in time for the film's 75th anniversary, John Walsh's new history is an absorbing and insightful take on Carol Reed's defining post-war thriller. There's some lovely behind-the-scenes colour — one section is subtitled "Orson Goes Down The Drain" — and a fascinating account of when the world briefly went zither-crazy for Anton Karas' famous score. **JN**

GODZILLA: THE OFFICIAL POP-UP BOOK

★★★★

AUTHOR **MATTHEW REINHART**

It's rare you come across a book that is virtually un-reviewable: both a work of staggering genius — there are astonishing feats of intricate origami here — and a silly, gimmicky experience — it amounts to a mere four pages. It's hard to know who it's for (there are surely few under-fives familiar with the *kaiju* genre), but big kids will adore it. As far as pop-up books go, it's the king. **JN**



Clockwise from main: Head over heels — Jack Quaid as Nathan; Run for your life; Quaid with Amber Midthunder as Shari.

FILM

NOVOCAINE

NO PAIN, SOME GAIN FOR JACK QUAID

★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **110 MINS**

DIRECTORS Dan Berk, Robert Olsen
CAST Jack Quaid, Amber Midthunder, Ray Nicholson, Jacob Batalon, Betty Gabriel

PLOT Nathan (Quaid) — who can feel no pain — embarks on a rescue mission when bank robbers kidnap the girl of his dreams (Midthunder).

"MEET NATHAN CAINE. He can't feel pain." As far as poster taglines go, that is an all-timer: neatly and succinctly boiling down a zany high concept into seven simple words. For yes, Nathan Caine (Jack Quaid) has congenital insensitivity to pain, a condition that comes in very handy when he inadvertently finds himself in an action-comedy film. In its outlandish premise tailor-made for wacky genre mishaps, it shares some ingredients with the nutty 2006 Jason Statham flick *Crank* — even if its execution is not quite as bold. (No falling out of a helicopter and surviving here.)

Novocaine's Nathan is not dissimilar from Jack Quaid's most famous role thus far, Hughie in *The Boys*: a bumbling, nerdy everyman, reluctantly thrust into a tough-guy world. When we meet him, he's a kind-hearted credit union assistant manager, who mostly spends his spare time playing video games with the gamertag 'MagicNateBall'. When bank robbers descend on the credit union, they take Nathan's colleague and romantic interest Shari (Amber Midthunder) hostage — leading Nathan to take matters into his own hands.

Directors Dan Berk and Robert Olsen understand that a good action movie must royally beat its hero up six ways to Sunday, and sure enough, Nathan takes some real hits, taking full advantage of his condition. He shrugs off an arrow through the leg, cheerfully removes a bullet from a hole in his arm, and gamely hams it up during a torture scene by pretending to be in pain. It's a fun idea, and you kind of wish it had been pushed further: Nathan's cumulative injuries become increasingly grisly, but aren't really mined comedically. This is the kind of comedy to provoke snickers rather than any belly laughs.

The action, meanwhile, will only provoke the odd approving nod rather than enthusiastic air-punches. Quaid is good value, but while this has a premise that most action stars would dream of, its fight choreography is strictly workmanlike. It's a real shame that Amber Midthunder, the only one here with genuine action bona fides — her turn in *Prey* marked the arrival of a new star of the genre — is largely left to be a damsel-in-distress type, even with a nicely unexpected mid-movie wrinkle for her character.

Nothing about this is ruinously bad — it all just feels like a race to the middle; obvious needle drops on the soundtrack (R.E.M.'s 'Everybody Hurts', The Darkness' 'I Believe In A Thing Called Love') speak to a slight lack of imagination. For such a fun, silly premise, given promise by one of the best taglines in recent memory, it's disappointing that *Novocaine* only ever manages okay, rather than great. Pass the anaesthetic. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT **A largely painless viewing experience — but it could have been far more pleasurable.**

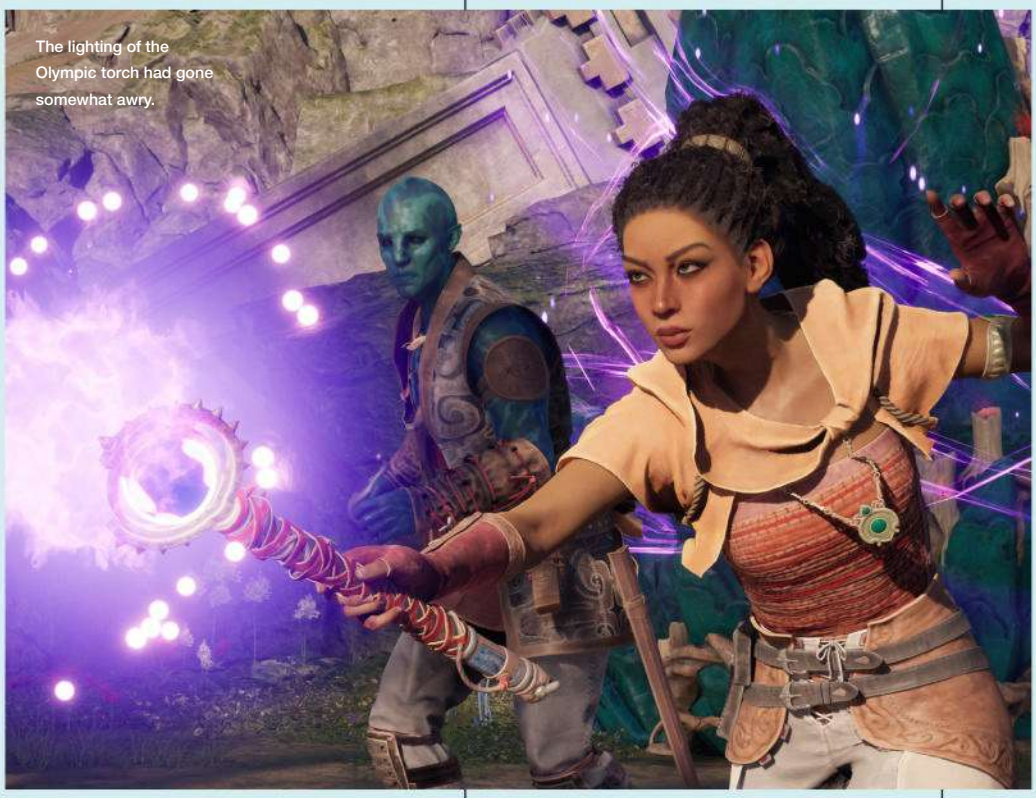
GAMES

AVOWED

IS THERE MUSHROOM FOR ANOTHER FANTASY RPG?

★★★★

PC, XBOX SERIES X|S



The lighting of the Olympic torch had gone somewhat awry.

YOU ARE THE Envoy to the Emperor of Aedyr, sent to the untamed Living Lands to investigate the strange 'Dreamscourge' — a horrific blight that corrupts man and beast alike, driving them mad with unspoken voices while their bodies erupt with fungal infestations. Yet you are also a 'Godlike', altered by the divine before birth, their ethereal touch manifesting on you as mushroom-like protrusions — and ever since you arrived on the strange frontier, you've been hearing voices in your head...

The mycelium motif may sound bonkers, but it's integral, not only to *Avowed's* protagonist (allowing for a unique character creator that ranges from 'enoki for hair' to 'Swamp Thing'), but also the world you're exploring. Despite being set in the same universe as developer Obsidian Entertainment's earlier *Pillars Of Eternity* games, seeing creatures and landscapes warped by spore growths provides a unique visual identity distinct from the glut of fantasy RPGs — more *The Last Of Us* than *Skyrim*.

Of course, *Skyrim* comparisons are inevitable, but where that first-person adventure has a singular open world, *Avowed* opts for curated regions — still vast, but better designed and dense with secrets. And, while the endlessly branching story offers a similar amount of freedom to mould your mushroom-infused hero however you will — whether that's into a fungi or a real piece of shiitake — the main plot here feels more structured.

That's largely down to the presence of your companions, major supporting characters aiding your journey. Like the game itself, they often subvert expectations — the dwarf isn't Scottish, for once! — and their own histories prove integral to the unfolding saga. The trade-off is that their narrative necessity often makes them feel like accessories — disgust lizard-man fighter Kai with brutal actions in the name of the colonialist Aedyran Empire all you want, but he'll stick around because the next chapter needs him.

Everything comes together in *Avowed's* combat though, the game's brightest spot. Your character's skills can be endlessly tweaked, allowing experimentation with different abilities and play styles — fighter, ranger, wizard, or any combination — and complemented by two of your companions joining you in battle. Throw in the option to dual-wield (combining an axe with a spell-casting grimoire, say, for a mix of melee and magic) and it feels wonderfully versatile. At its best, strategic attacks and speedy dodges combine into an almost balletic flow.

That still might not be enough to stand out from the crowd, but with its strong writing and characters, *Avowed's* fungal fable proves an undeniably entertaining experience, regardless of whether you're playing as a champignon of justice or a smooth cremini. **MATT KAMEN**

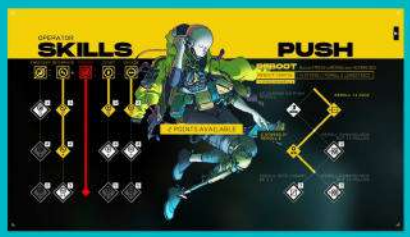
VERDICT **Playing the hits, but with enough improvisation to hold interest, *Avowed* is unlikely to become anyone's favourite RPG, but it makes for a great entry point into Obsidian's captivating shared world.**

SNIPER ELITE: RESISTANCE

★★★

PC, PS4, PS5, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES X|S

British ace sniper Harry Hawker takes over from previous protagonist Karl Fairburne in this latest World War II-set stealth shooter, but that and new timed challenges are the only notable differences to 2022's *Sniper Elite 5*. Its long-distance gunplay remains unrivalled, and gory X-ray kill-cams whenever you dispatch a Nazi are darkly satisfying, but this might be the last shot for a series light on fresh ideas. **MK**



CITIZEN SLEEPER 2: STARWARD VECTOR

★★★★

NINTENDO SWITCH, PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES X|S

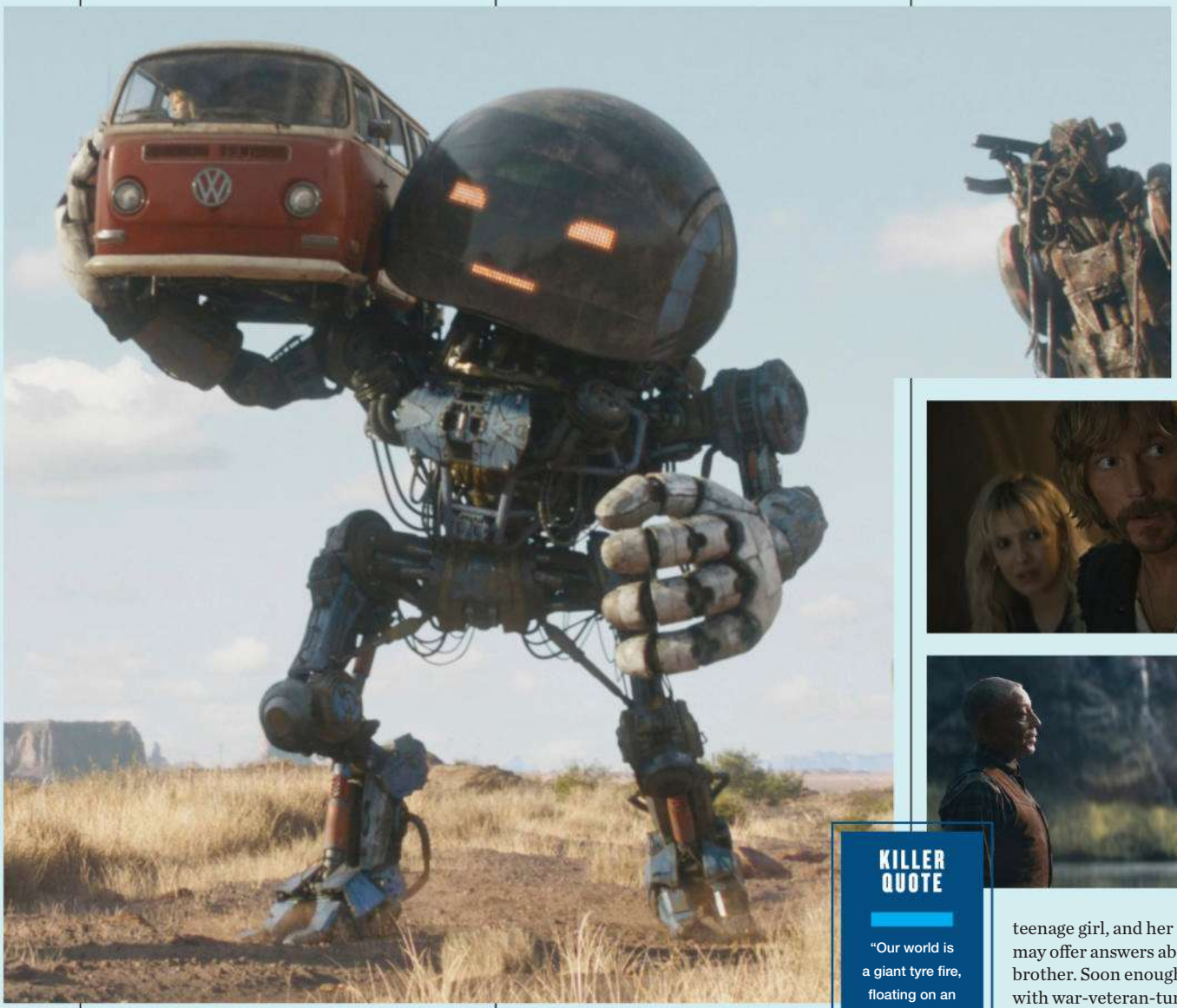
A text-based RPG akin to *Disco Elysium*, this casts you as an android with a human's consciousness, fleeing across the stars in a dystopian, corporate-controlled future. The only real 'gameplay' is dice rolls to determine the outcomes of key actions, but engaging writing and a plot branching out into countless possible outcomes make it absorbing like little else. **MK**

STAR WARS EPISODE I: JEDI POWER BATTLES REMASTER

★★

NINTENDO SWITCH, PC, PS4, PS5, XBOX ONE, XBOX SERIES X|S

This modern port of the PS1-era action game rights a galactic wrong — you can finally play through as Mace Windu. Yet despite adding in more playable characters and bonus content from the Dreamcast release, it's more re-release than remaster, lacking much in the way of visual glow-up. Solely for nostalgists or *Star Wars* obsessives. **MK**



Clockwise from left: Have robot, will travel; Michelle (Millie Bobby Brown) and Keats (Chris Pratt) team up; They tried to see eye to eye.

FILM

THE ELECTRIC STATE

THE RUSSOS VS THE MACHINES

★★★

OUT **14 MARCH (NETFLIX)** / CERT **TBC** / **205 MINS**

DIRECTORS Joe Russo, Anthony Russo
CAST Millie Bobby Brown, Chris Pratt, Ke Huy Quan, Jason Alexander, Woody Harrelson, Brian Cox, Giancarlo Esposito, Stanley Tucci

PLOT In an alt-1990s, orphaned teenager Michelle (Brown) crosses a dangerous exclusion zone with smuggler Keats (Pratt) — and a mysterious robot — in search of her younger brother.

IN 2018, SIMON STÅLENHAG released *The Electric State*, a "narrative art" sci-fi book which depicted, with darkly understated beauty, a retro-futurist sci-fi vision of America, a strange land traversed by a teenage girl and a cute, yellow-headed robot pal. Unlike another Stålenhag adaptation, *Tales From The Loop*, made into a similarly understated TV series in 2020, this feature-length take on *The Electric State* borrows the aesthetics but not the tone of its original text, evolving from a haunting dystopia to quippy action adventure.

Quippy action adventures, of course, are the modus operandi of the Russo brothers, the filmmaking siblings currently in their inter-Marvel era (they return to assembling Avengers imminently). They direct this with the confidence born of the second-biggest film of all time (*Avengers: Endgame*, to be clear, not *You, Me And Dupree*), even if the script from their regular scribes Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely needed a bit of a polish.

A breathless opening montage brings us up to speed. Robots, we are told, were originally developed for Disney theme parks before becoming part of the global workforce. In the '90s, the now-sentient machines began demanding "robot rights", and a deadly war emerged — like if Skynet developed a social conscience. As part of the peace agreement, all bots now live in a giant exclusion zone in the desert.

Into this alternate '90s arrives Michelle (Millie Bobby Brown), the aforementioned teenage girl, and her droid pal, who may offer answers about her long-lost brother. Soon enough, they team up with war-veteran-turned-smuggler Keats (Chris Pratt) and take on charismatic tech billionaire Ethan Skate (Stanley Tucci) and bot-bounty-hunter Colonel Marshall Bradbury (Giancarlo Esposito).

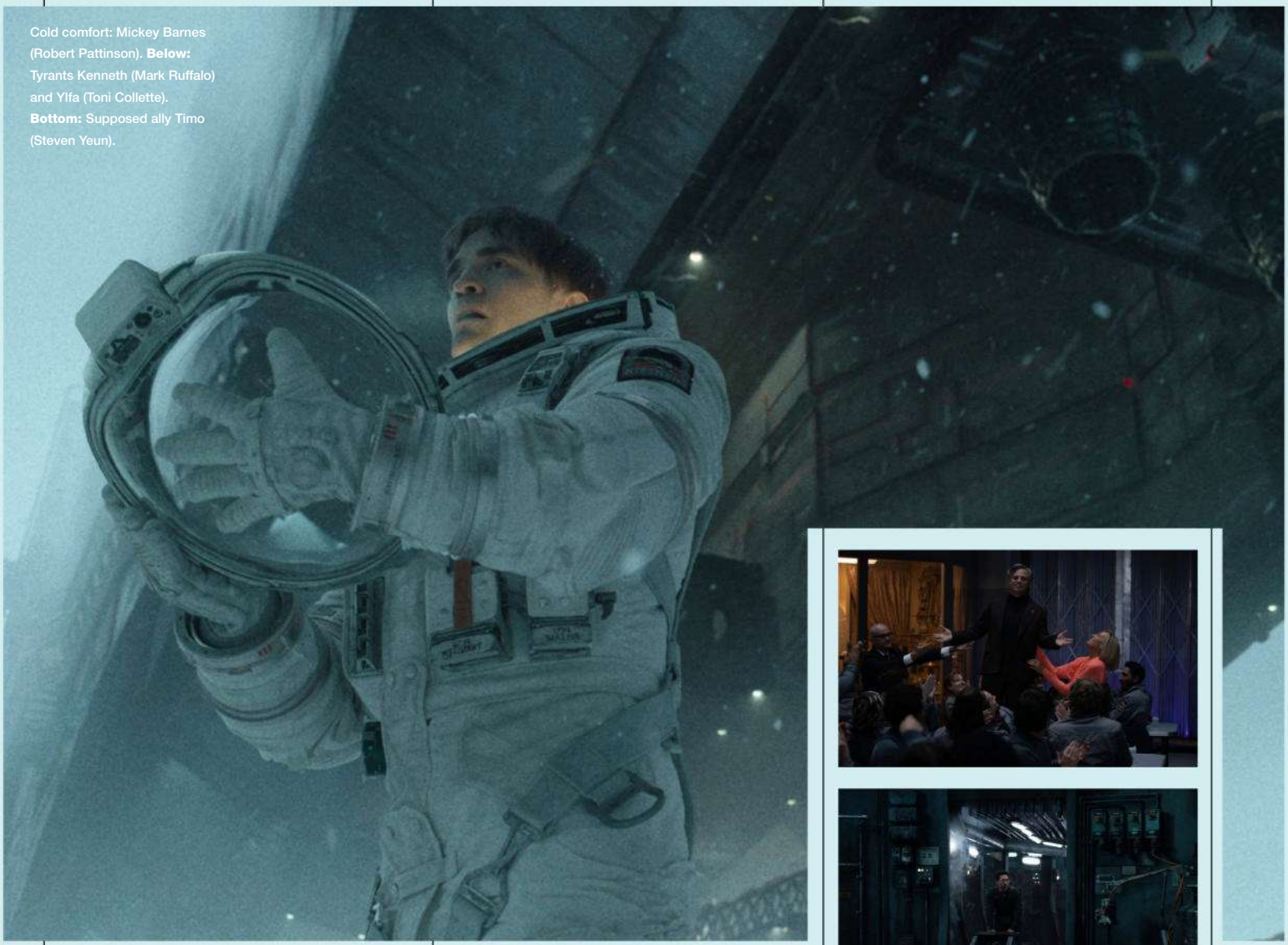
KILLER QUOTE

"Our world is a giant tyre fire, floating on an ocean of piss."
ETHAN SKATE (STANLEY TUCCI)

The Russos make the most of their enormous budget, with a boatload of impressive visual effects, faithful recreations of Stålenhag's epic vistas, and some nicely analogue art direction. Its eccentricity won't be for all (the actual line of dialogue "Mr Peanut signed a treaty of surrender with President Clinton today" is a stand-out), and not every swing for the fences lands. But at least swings are being made.

Less successful, perhaps, are the human characters: both Brown and Pratt enjoy better chemistry with the CG characters than they do with each other, and the dialogue is not as witty as it thinks it is (though the script does at least manage a couple of solid one-liners). With occasionally repetitive action, the film never quite strikes the aspirational Spielbergian tone it's reaching for, but as blockbusters go, at least it's a singular experience with ambition in spades. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT ***The Electric State*** **loses some of the quiet profundity of the original text, but as a breezily watchable retrofuturistic jolly, it has just enough juice.**



Cold comfort: Mickey Barnes (Robert Pattinson). **Below:** Tyrants Kenneth (Mark Ruffalo) and Ylfa (Toni Collette). **Bottom:** Supposed ally Timo (Steven Yeun).

FILM

MICKEY 17

R-PATZ GOES ALL LIVE, DIE, REPEAT

★★★★

OUT **NOW** / CERT **15** / **137 MINS**

DIRECTOR Bong Joon Ho
CAST Robert Pattinson, Naomi Ackie, Mark Ruffalo, Toni Collette, Steven Yeun, Anamaria Vartolomei

PLOT Desperate to leave Earth, Mickey Barnes (Pattinson) enlists as an 'expendable': a crew-member on a colony ship given the most dangerous missions, and killed multiple times.

NO-ONE IS better than director Bong Joon Ho at using the rules of genre filmmaking against his audience. In the extraordinary *Parasite*, he engineered a mid-film switch from social comedy to something much darker and more outrageous; in *Snowpiercer* it emerged that the revolutionary struggle we'd been rooting for was only a fraction of the true battle for survival. Now, in *Mickey 17*, he tackles space travel and the colonisation of alien worlds. If it's a more conventional film than his best work, he still finds ways to use our expectations against us, and continually surprise us with a hero who's just trying his inadequate best.

Robert Pattinson, wide-eyed and squeaky-voiced, is Mickey Barnes, who needs to get off-Earth sharpish. In the absence of any discernible skill-set, he signs up as an 'expendable', and to be killed over and over again on a colony ship headed to the planet of Niflheim under the authority of monstrous politician and cult leader Kenneth Marshall (Mark Ruffalo) and his wife Ylfa (Toni Collette). All is fine, apart from the dying and being 'reprinted' by a 'human printer', and Mickey even strikes up a relationship with security officer Nasha (Naomi Ackie). But then, Mickey #17 unexpectedly survives a near-death experience, and gets home to find the new version of himself, Mickey #18, already up and about. It's a scenario that means death for both, so Mickey must finally develop some wits and try and keep them about him.

You'd think — not least because the trailer implies as much — that this is another epic tale of revolt against a corrupt regime and human triumph, and there is a bit of that. Ruffalo, over the top as a Trumpian wannabe dictator, intends to remake the new planet in his own image: he even calls it a "pure white world" at one point. But this is so much weirder than just a political satire. The hard-sci-fi concept of human printing is a clever device, and director Bong delves into what makes Mickey human, and what qualifies as humane. More surprising, perhaps, is that his trademark fury at social injustice is ultimately joined by a strong sense of romance and even optimism about the future.

After all, he has imagined that we could be sailing into the stars in our lifetime, that we might thrive beyond Earth, and that humanity can survive without just shooting everything in sight under terrible leadership. Mickey makes an unlikely saviour, but his hapless attempts to survive and thrive against all the odds — and, again, 16 previous failed attempts at life — are inspiring. **HELEN O'HARA**

VERDICT **Like Mickey himself, it's goofy and a little inconsistent, but it's also funny, thoughtful and more plausible than we might like. A charming space oddity for these unusual times.**

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"Here's one I made earlier." **Below:** Going for a song.

FILM

THE END

... OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT, LET'S SING A SONG

★★★

OUT **28 MARCH** / CERT **12A** / **148 MINS**

DIRECTOR Joshua Oppenheimer
CAST George MacKay, Michael Shannon, Tilda Swinton, Moses Ingram, Lennie James

PLOT The world is on fire, and a wealthy family take shelter in an underground bunker. A woman (Ingram) appears seeking refuge.

THERE'S A STARTLING contrast to *The End*, introduced in its first minutes. A gloomy, dusty salt mine is soundtracked by light flutes and strings. Inside the mine's cavernous depths, Father (Michael Shannon), Mother (Tilda Swinton) and Son (George MacKay) live in an opulent mansion, where paintings and books line every room and hallway. Through hopeful song, they affirm that "together our future is bright". But what future is there at the end of the world?

Joshua Oppenheimer's offbeat riff on post-apocalyptic Earth reveals its circumstances in a slow trickle. There's word of fires that have consumed the planet, then the fossil fuels that ignited them. At first glance, a musical seems like an unusual shift for Oppenheimer, best known for his pair of unflinching documentaries on the anti-communist Indonesian mass murders of the mid-20th century, *The Act Of Killing* and *The Look Of Silence*. But like the perpetrators in those, the family at the centre of the director's first narrative film is content to live in ignorance of the destruction they've inflicted. Father and Son are working together on a biography of the former, rewriting the past to absolve him of the environmental collapse he may well have caused as an oil-industry magnate, while Mother prefers to ignore why she didn't bring her side of the family to safety.

If that denialism isn't quite as potent as it is in Oppenheimer's documentaries, the film's ideas are compelling in their unconventional approach. Putting thoughts to music, these people are evidently escaping more than just the raging fires outside — they're evading a truth they can't face. As is familiar in apocalyptic tales, their bubble is burst by an outsider (Moses Ingram) — a nameless stranger who appears seeking shelter, and pulls at the loose threads of the family's falsehoods. Her presence has a particularly strong effect on the Son, having only known a sheltered existence in the bunker. MacKay's unpredictable (and flatulent) performance is a highlight, containing all the awkwardness and boundless curiosity of a boy in arrested development. At 25, his only experience of the world has been filtered through textbooks and lies, and his burgeoning relationship with the newcomer pushes him to question everything for the first time.

The End is an audacious and daring formal experiment, even if its big swings don't always pay off. This is no *Wicked*, with songs performed to an empty audience in dusty salt mines in stilted, talk-singing that provides a striking contrast with the lush, Sondheim-like orchestrations from composers Joshua Schmidt and Marius de Vries. Even so, Oppenheimer's film constructs a mesmerising fantasy from the rubble of a scorched Earth, suggesting that the end is never really the end — it's a new beginning. **IANA MURRAY**

VERDICT **Joshua Oppenheimer's uncompromising, apocalyptic odyssey thoughtfully unpacks the stories people tell themselves to survive — but don't expect to be tapping your feet to its collection of lacklustre songs.**

also out

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A THOUSAND BLOWS
★★★★ TV

"Stephen Graham's metamorphosis is incredible, dialling up the violence of *This Is England*'s Combo and finding a sense of frenzied, animalistic rage. Underneath the toxic masculinity and unwillingness to embrace the new ways, there's a surprising complexity to the character." **NICOLA AUSTIN**

SISTER MIDNIGHT
★★★ FILM

"Karan Kandhari's feature debut initially plays like a marriage comedy, before a mid-movie revelation zigzags clumsily and inconsistently between plotlines. Still, you've got to applaud Kandhari for having the guts to crack open his movie and reshape it into something altogether different." **YASMIN OMAR**

KINDA PREGNANT
★★ FILM

"Deeply misconceived and steadily unfunny, this feels longer than its running time. A few moments of emotional honesty between mothers are the only bits worth watching, but they're too scant to save this mess." **HELEN O'HARA**

WIN OR LOSE
★★★ TV

"This is essentially Pixar's *Rashomon*: looking at the same baseball game from a different angle each episode. The result is a fairly middle-of-the-road affair: a decent-enough way to pass the time with America's greatest pastime." **DAVID OPIE**

APPLE CIDER VINEGAR
★★★ TV

"Juggling Instagram nonsense, devastating terminal illness and endless coffee enemas is a tricky tightrope-walk, but one that this show manages to pull off — mostly thanks to a magnetic central performance from Kaitlyn Dever." **SOPHIE BUTCHER**

MANiACS

THEY'RE NOT SUPER. THEY BARELY HAVE POWERS. BUT IN MARVEL'S **THUNDERBOLTS***, A RAG-TAG GROUP OF UNHINGED MISFITS TEAM UP FOR A BERSERKER MISSION. BRACE YOURSELF...

WORDS
CHRIS HEWITT

ASSEMBLE

"IT'S THIS BADASS INDIE, A24-FEELING ASSASSIN MOVIE WITH MARVEL SUPERHEROES"

FLORENCE PUGH

WHEN IT COMES TO PUNCTUATION IN movie titles, the asterisk has been sorely underrated and shockingly underrepresented. Commas, we've had a few. You can't move for question marks? And the less said about the proliferation of exclamation marks, the better! Punctuation is all the rage, or: how Hollywood learned to stop worrying and love the colon.

But the asterisk — the humble, simple, lovable asterisk — has had something of a raw deal. There's that Woody Allen film whose name escapes us, but that was over 50 years ago. But now it's the asterisk's turn to shine, as Marvel Studios drops it into the title of the latest Marvel Cinematic Universe movie. Here's everything you wanted to know about *Thunderbolts**, but were afraid to ask.

****

WHEN *THUNDERBOLTS** WAS FIRST announced at Comic-Con in July 2022, it was just plain old *Thunderbolts*. But it still caught the eye, as something of an unknown quantity: a team-up movie that would collect some of the less-heralded and little-seen characters in the MCU, characters who want a shot at redemption, and don't want to end up a cartoon in a cartoon graveyard. Characters like Florence Pugh's Yelena Belova, sister of the late Natasha Romanoff, or Sebastian Stan's Marvel mainstay, Bucky Barnes, or Yelena's boorish but bighearted adoptive dad, Alexei Shostakov, aka Red Guardian (David Harbour), or Wyatt Russell's disgraced former Captain America, John Walker.

The asterisk came later. Almost two years later, in fact, nonchalantly dropped after filming had begun in Atlanta. "We wanted to do something very different," says executive producer Brian Chapek, "and capture people's attention."

Job done. Immediately, tongues started wagging about the significance of the asterisk, and what it portended. What could it mean? "I actually know," laughs Pugh now. "But I'm not gonna tell you. I hold all the power."

A recent Japanese poster for the movie suggested that the asterisk was merely a gag, with the Pratchettian punchline being, "The Avengers aren't available." But no. Surely that can't be it. Surely it can't be that unsatisfying a reveal. "I don't think I can say anything," teases the director, Jake Schreier. "I can say that it

Clockwise from main: Yelena Belova (Florence Pugh) and Bob (Lewis Pullman) see the light; Shadowy fixer Valentina Allegra de Fontaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus); Ghost (Hannah John-Kamen) is on target; Sebastian Stan and director Jake Schreier on location.

means something. There's some general sense of what an asterisk means."

Namely, it's suggesting that there might be more to the title. One theory posits the notion that the asterisk means that *Thunderbolts* might not be the final name of the movie, or the team. After all, the Thunderbolts themselves will spend quite a bit of time arguing about what to call themselves, and 'Thunderbolts' might not win out. It might be something else; something that would be revealed at the end of the film. 'Dark Avengers', for instance. It wouldn't be the first time that Marvel Studios has done this — the final title-card of *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier*, for instance, changes the title of that show to *Captain America And The Winter Soldier*.

However, even with a couple of months to go, nobody's budging an inch. "I don't think I've ever seen a movie that's had people go, 'What does this mean? Is this the title? Is this not the title?'" says Harbour.

And certainly nobody is revealing the official title, if that is indeed the play here. But who better to ask what *Thunderbolts** should be called than the Thunderbolts themselves? "'Hi, I Like You... Don't Make Me Kill You'," says Sebastian Stan, chipping in with a title even more unwieldy than *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness*. "'Bad Guys Gone Wild'!" yells Wyatt Russell. "We all take our shirts off at the end of the movie. We haven't seen Marvel heroes on spring break, come on!"

But if there's one fake title that perhaps nutshells what we can expect from *Thunderbolts**, it's to Florence Pugh we must turn. "'Just A Bunch Of Mad Shit'," she says. Bring on the asterisky business.

* * * * * * *

"JUST A BUNCH OF MAD SHIT" WAS NOT how Kevin Feige phrased it when he told Schreier that the *Thunderbolts** gig was his after a seven-month pitching process. But he did have a request for the director. "'Make it something different,'" recalls Schreier. "That was the directive coming from the top. 'Do something different with this.'"

That's hard to do when you're six movies into a series. When you're 36 in, it feels virtually impossible. Yet that's what Schreier — making his MCU debut at the third time of trying, after coming close to both *Guardians Of The Galaxy* and *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, losing the latter to his college roommate, Jon Watts — is trying to do with *Thunderbolts**. Pugh believes he's more than succeeded. "It ended up becoming this quite badass indie, A24-feeling assassin movie with Marvel superheroes," she laughs.

Schreier's background is, as you might expect from that description, an indie one, filled with the likes of *Robot & Frank*, *Paper Towns*, and the Netflix show, *Beef*. It's that sensibility he's aiming to port over to the MCU, from the asterisk to the attitude (the score is by experimental three-piece band Son Lux, for example). Just a bunch of mad shit would seem to fit the bill. "I don't like to be so arrogant as to say that no-one's ever done anything like this," says Schreier. "[But] there's a certain amount of that *Beef* tone in it, that does feel different. There's an emotional darkness that we brought to this that is resonant, but doesn't come at the expense of comedy."

In the comics, the Thunderbolts (who bear no relation to Harrison Ford's Thunderbolt Ross, by the way, despite this movie coming hot on the heels of the Red Hulk's introduction to the MCU) were initially a team of supervillains pretending to be heroes to curry public favour. That's not the case here, but it does remain a team whose ledgers are positively running red. So there's an obvious comparison point or two. There's *Guardians Of The Galaxy*, of course, and something not a million miles away at Marvel's great rivals, DC. "I think people are maybe expecting just another version of *Suicide Squad*," says Schreier. "But the story felt different. There was a flip of what people expected it to be." ›

Right: Red alert: John Walker (Wyatt Russell). **Far right, top to bottom:** Cheers to Val for assembling the Thunderbolts; Masked avenger Taskmaster (Olga Kurylenko); (L-R) John Walker, Yelena Belova, Bucky Barnes (Stan), Alexei Shostakov/Red Guardian (David Harbour) and Ghost get knotted; Yelena is a sure shot; Congressman Barnes?

So, what people expected to be a *Dirty Dozen/Suicide Squad*-style movie, in which a team of bickering badasses is assembled by Julia Louis-Dreyfus' shadowy fixer Valentina Allegra de Fontaine — Val, for short — and sent on a high-odds, high-stakes mission, is, well, not that. Val *has* been recruiting people, that is true — Yelena at the end of *Black Widow*, John Walker, the disgraced former Captain America, at the end of *The Falcon And The Winter Soldier* and, it's safe to presume, Hannah John-Kamen's Ghost, returning for the first time since 2018's *Ant-Man And The Wasp*, and Olga Kurylenko's Black Widow villain, Taskmaster — and she *does* send them on a high-odds, high-stakes mission. But there things take a turn. Because Val sees them as loose ends. And loose ends can get snipped. "Valentina actually sends them to kill each other," says Chapek. "They realise that the only way out of this is to work together. There's this tenuous truce."

That's four members of the Thunderbolts team accounted for, then. But that's not considering the contributions of Harbour's Red Guardian, the Soviet super-soldier since gone to seed, to whom Yelena turns in a moment of crisis ("I was always protective about the storyline with Alexei," says Pugh. "Maybe it's not as happy as you'd hope, and how do they get past that?"), and Stan's Bucky Barnes. "What I love about Bucky is he's had so many evolutions," says Stan. The latest of which sees him running for Congress (it's not like they care about that whole 'killing loads of people as a Russian sleeper agent' thing), only for his entanglement with the Thunderbolts to rear its ugly head at the worst possible time. "It's like the Al Pacino quote from *Godfather III*," laughs Stan. "Every time I try to get out, they pull me back in. Bucky is going to come across this group, and realise that they're quite similar, in a way, to him. So I think he feels he can contribute and be a leader."

How exactly Alexei and Bucky fit in remains to be seen. It'll be a tight fit, bordering on the uncomfortable. "The root is," notes Pugh, "these people that shouldn't be in the same room together are in a room together."

One day, though, the Thunderbolts will click and become a team. And, as chance would have it, on the day that happens, *Empire* is there to witness it.

* * * * * * *

IT'S MID-MAY IN 2024, AND *EMPIRE* HAS flown all the way to Atlanta just to find ourselves on a pitch-perfect recreation of a New York street, at the corner of East 45th and Vanderbilt

"THE DIRECTIVE FROM THE TOP WAS, 'DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT WITH THIS'"

JAKE SCHREIER

Avenue, right near Grand Central Station, all recreated with uncanny accuracy. From an overpass to the familiar brickwork of Grand Central's outer facade, to the rows of tables and chairs for outdoor diners, complete with plates of fake food that look convincing to the eye but wouldn't pass the stomach test.

One building, with a resplendent entrance all black glass and chrome, is the only giveaway (other than the cameras and the cranes and the crowds of extras) that we're in a Marvel movie. Because this is the entrance to the Watchtower, Val's HQ. Which you might know better by its former name, Avengers Tower. "We know what that tower means," says Schreier. "Who's the person you would least like to own that tower, that means so much to so many people? Can you use that as a symbol of things taking a darker turn?"

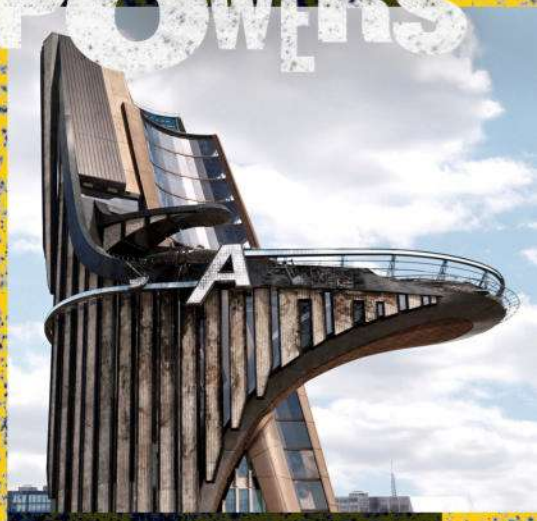
It's here, just outside the building, where the Thunderbolts have put aside their differences to make a difference. Because something has unleashed hell upon New York, and rubble and debris and detritus is raining from the skies. Including a giant slab of concrete that is about to fall on a bunch of bystanders. Until the Thunderbolts come to the rescue, with Walker putting his back up against the slab, Red Guardian pushing at it with his enhanced strength, and even Yelena and Ghost giving it a good old go as well. Bucky is last to the party, with that marvellous mechanical arm of his. Stan is wearing a version of that on his arm. "I've never taken the green-sleeve option," he says, sitting down later. "It's like a house of cards, and when you see a little hole there that you can poke through, all the other believability goes out the window."

Eventually, the actors push (or pretend to push) the giant slab over, and it hits the ground with a thud, throwing up a cloud of dust that coats them. "You were privy to a hugely pivotal moment in the movie," Pugh tells *Empire* later. "They get to trust each other, which is what the whole movie is about."

Sets, especially ones this large and complicated, aren't new to the MCU, of course. But this feels like a deliberate, concerted move away from the over-reliance on greenscreen that has dented many a recent MCU movie. Right down to the slab itself. It's easy to imagine a scenario where they could just magic in a CG rock. But no, here it is, weighing several tons, held up by a series of cables, with the actual actors getting into place underneath it. There are all kinds of back-ups and fail-safes and safety regulations at work here — if you squash your five leads, you're going to struggle to make your schedule. "That slab was, like, 1,400 lb or something crazy," laughs Wyatt Russell, a few months later. "When we got under it I was like, 'We're sure this is safe?' That was a pretty cool day."

It's a moment that speaks to Schreier's emphasis on keeping things grounded, and real. "The hope was to make the whole thing a little bit more human-scale," says the director. ›

TOWER OF POWERS



LANDMARK MOMENTS FROM A LANDMARK BUILDING

HULK SMASH

THE AVENGERS

The then-called Stark Tower was first introduced in the original *Avengers* movie: nothing can beat the instantly iconic scene where Hulk (Mark Ruffalo) ragdolls a preening Loki (Tom Hiddleston) into the pristine floor of Stark's living quarters.

ROBOT ROCK

AVENGERS: AGE OF ULTRON

Stark soon sold the renamed Avengers Tower — while impressive architecture, it's also filled with bad memories. Namely, it's the place where Ultron was born, rudely interrupting a carefree party where the Avengers got slightly buzzed and tried to pull on Thor's hammer.

HAPPY GO LOKI

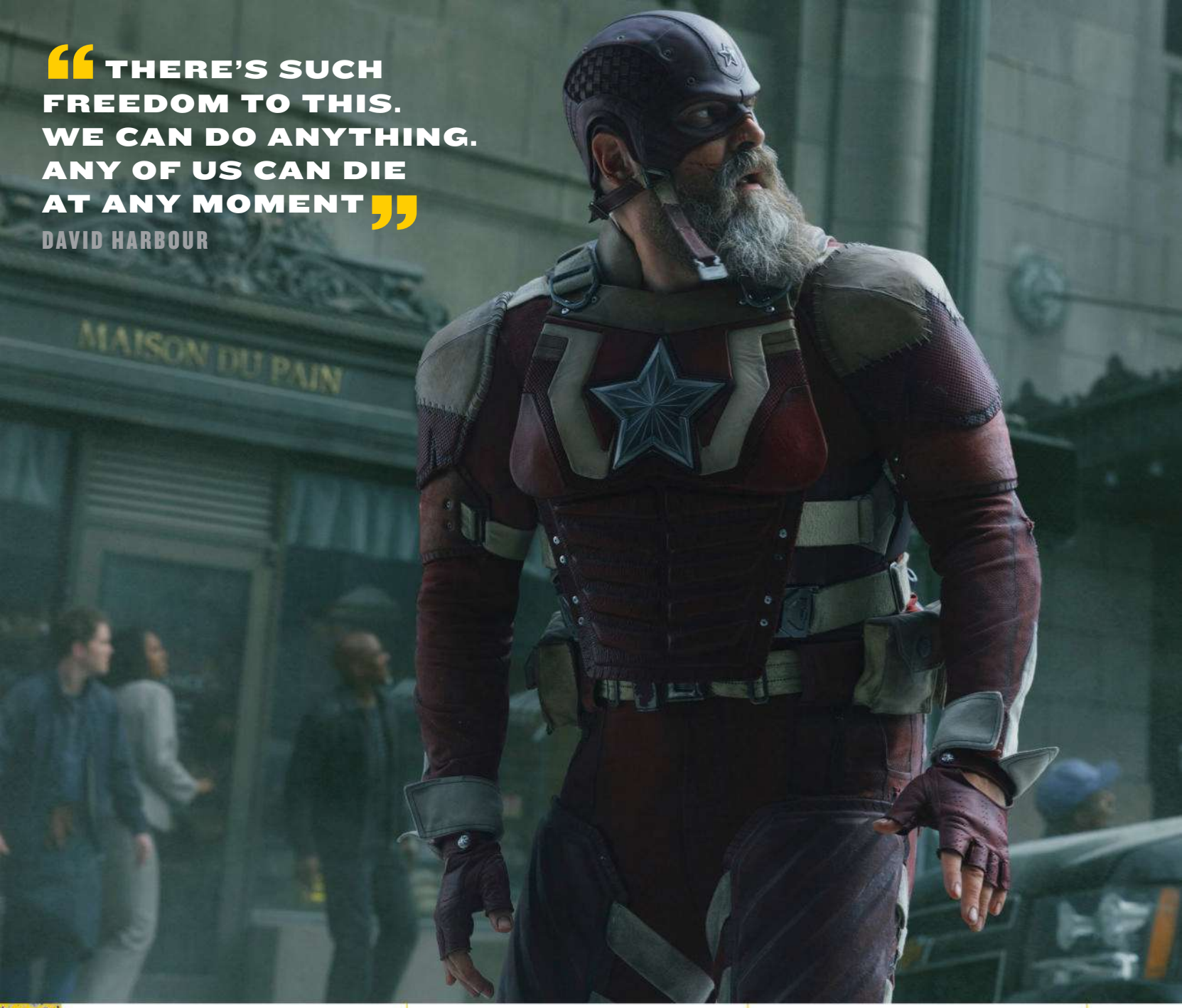
AVENGERS: ENDGAME

You can't keep a good erection down, though. And Avengers Tower returned in the timey-wimey bit of *Endgame* where Tony and his team looped through the events of the first *Avengers* movie. They don't quite manage to be entirely passive observers of the truth, though — a Hulk-centric mishap in the lobby allows Loki to seize the Tesseract and escape, setting up the events of his own show.

HOGAN'S HERO

WHAT IF...?

Season 2's 'What If… Happy Hogan Saved Christmas?' is a delightful *Die Hard* riff, in which terrorists led by Sam Rockwell's Justin Hammer seize control of Avengers Tower on Christmas Eve, forcing Jon Favreau's Happy Hogan to, somehow, Hulk out and save the day. Since then, Wade Wilson has (in *Deadpool & Wolverine*) admitted he "was caught smashturbating in the lobby of Stark Tower" with a pair of Hulk hands. But let's not mention that.



> **"THERE'S SUCH FREEDOM TO THIS. WE CAN DO ANYTHING. ANY OF US CAN DIE AT ANY MOMENT"**
>
> DAVID HARBOUR

"Would it be interesting to try one of these movies in a kind of handmade fashion, and connect a little bit more to the emotion?" But it also rams home the fact that the Thunderbolts are by no means the most powerful assortment of characters in the MCU. Taskmaster has an uncanny ability to replicate anyone's fighting style, but only Ghost, who can become intangible, has anything resembling an old-fashioned superpower. "She's the real hero here," laughs Hannah John-Kamen. "Winner winner chicken dinner is all I can say!"

Yes, Walker, Alexei and Bucky all have a version of the super-soldier serum running through their veins, but they wouldn't be able to go toe-to-toe with the Hulk. As Yelena notes in one of the trailers, "None of us can fly. So, we all just punch and shoot?" But that balance and blend of powers and personalities has been meticulously assembled. They may not be able to replace the Avengers but, to paraphrase Brad Pitt in *Moneyball*, they can recreate them in the aggregate. "In relation to all the other characters that inhabit our universe, they feel human," says Chapek. "Which was very much intentional in building out this roster. We wanted them to feel vulnerable. People have no idea what a Thunderbolts movie is, or what it could be, and there's an opportunity in that to surprise people."

Surprising people is very much on the minds of the cast and creatives. When the movie was announced, its collection of characters who weren't quite on the MCU A-list was greeted with a degree of scepticism in some quarters; further evidence for some of the Marvel downshift. "People were like, 'Nobody needs this movie!'" laughs Harbour. "I get it. But my God, there's such freedom to this. We can sort of do anything, because we have no expectations. Any of us can die at any moment. We're not necessary to the MCU in a big way."

The Thunderbolts aren't Earth's Mightiest Heroes. More like The Heroes Who Stand Around Ten Feet Behind Earth's Mightiest Heroes, Slightly Out Of Focus. "We're not the heroes of our own stories," says John-Kamen. "We're the judged, the failures, the butt of the joke." And what better test of this new team than a foe so powerful that it might even feel like an unfair fight for the Avengers? As *Empire* watches Schreier and his cast film another scene, in which the anti-anti-heroes usher a group of terrified citizens to safety, it's hard not to wonder what is causing the people to panic. *Something* has warped Walker's seemingly unwarpable shield, bending it like it's made of plastic. *Something*, or someone, is about to ruin the Thunderbolts' day in a major way.

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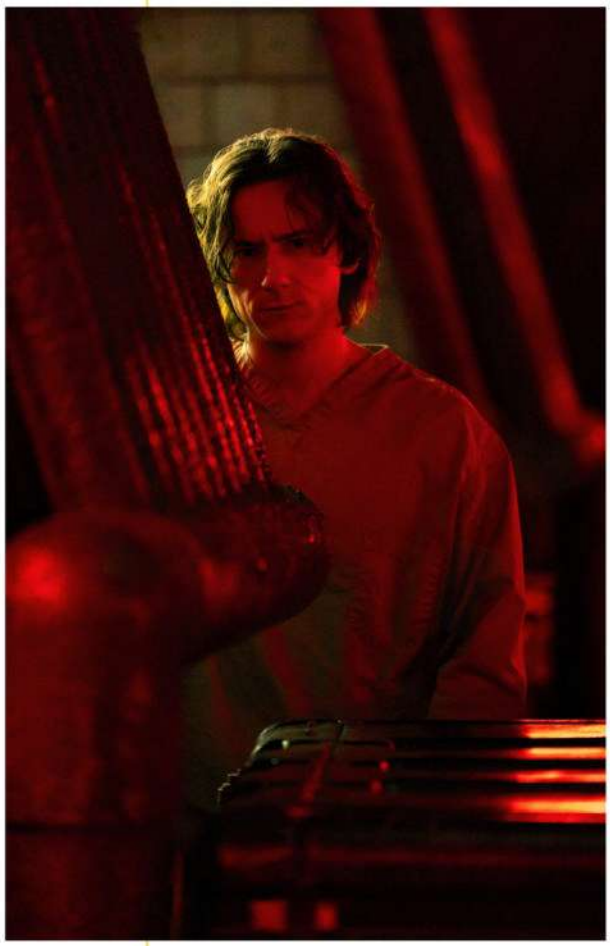
THE IDENTITY, AND ORIGIN, OF THE threat that the Thunderbolts are facing is being shrouded in shadow. Literally. In a recent trailer, a huge shadow is seen to cover most of



Clockwise from main: Alexei in all his Red Guardian uniform glory; Yelena leaves her calling card; Bob (Lewis Pullman) sees red.

New York, and a figure — so dark it might as well be a silhouette — makes short work of Bucky's arm, punches Red Guardian out of a window, and, hovering in the air, turns fleeing innocents (those poor extras) into mulch simply by pointing at them.

The prevailing theory is that this is the Void, an incredibly powerful character brand-new to the MCU but one who might just justify Chapek's claim that "there are big ramifications for what this movie means for the universe moving forward". Because The Void is the dark half of a hero called Sentry, who has the power of a million exploding suns (which is a lot; the power of one exploding sun would suffice for most people), but suffers from more Achilles' heels than he has actual heels, including crippling anxiety and mental-health issues. And the fact that he could, at any time, unleash the Void.

This doesn't seem to be a case of people putting two and two together and making Sentry. Sentry's human alter-ego is Robert Reynolds, and in *Thunderbolts**, Lewis Pullman plays a mysterious character called Bob, whom the Thunderbolts stumble upon during their journey. Bob is a gentle soul, a good soul, a lost soul. But is he hiding a darker secret?

Nobody's saying. "Bob serves an interesting purpose, and I was discovering that along the way," says Pullman, who stepped into the role at short notice after Steven Yeun had to drop out due to scheduling conflicts post-actors' strike. "He is, in some ways, a vessel to learn about how these other outcasts deal with pressure and rejection and death and loneliness. How do they deal with a bizarre problem like this?"

Whether or not he turns out to be Sentry, one thing is for sure: Bob bonds with Yelena. "I have quite a bit of the movie that I spend with Florence," says Pullman of their two-lost-souls swimming-in-a-fishbowl dynamic. "Bob is going through what all of them are probably, secretly, going through," adds Pugh. "Yelena sees parts of herself in him. She's always been someone that wants to look after people. She has a sweet spot for him, and essentially likes looking after him because he's useless. He's absolutely useless." At least, at first. In the final scene *Empire* observed being filmed, Yelena walks away from the fray and towards something that, judging from Alexei's anguished scream, signals danger. In the trailer, we see that she and the other Thunderbolts are heading into shadow. And, just possibly, into the Void.

It's a relationship that gets right to the beating heart, and head, of *Thunderbolts**. For all the quips and quick-fire action on display, Schreier has something on his mind that he wants to explore through the film. Namely, mental health. "You're talking about a group of characters that have done a lot of bad things, and maybe are struggling with feeling good about themselves," he says. "There's an element that does speak to mental health, and loneliness, and how some of the darkness that we experience in our lives can't be necessarily fixed, but can only really be made lighter through connection and finding others."

In the end, it all comes back to a movie that was a big influence on Schreier. "The first thing I did was make a reel of reference films," he says. In there were works you might expect — *Reservoir Dogs*, *Ronin*, *Mission: Impossible — Ghost Protocol* — and works you might not, from the likes of Michel Gondry and Spike Jonze, that hint at a deeply weird, possibly metaphysical, side of the film ("There might be a little layer of that in there," he teases). And then there's a film that you would never in a million years guess had a profound influence on *Thunderbolts**. "I had *Toy Story 3* in there," admits Schreier. "It wasn't as focused on a genre as much as dynamics amongst characters. They all have that dynamic of a team that is thrown together."

If there's a scene that particularly informs *Thunderbolts**, it's the one in which Woody, Buzz and all the rest of the toys are faced with oblivion via furnace, and link hands to face their fate. "That sequence works so well because you've come to care about these characters so much," says Schreier. "Can they get out of the trash can together?" He laughs, and shakes his head as he accepts the inevitable. "It really is just *Toy Story 3*. Forget Tarantino. That's my only reference."

Does that mean there will be a direct comparison in *Thunderbolts**, with the team standing side-by-side to face certain death? "There are loads of those moments," says Pugh. "But what's really sweet is that they don't know that they're holding hands yet. They don't know that they love each other yet, but they do."

We might have inadvertently stumbled upon the most compelling 'real' title for the film yet. After all, when is *Thunderbolts** not *Thunderbolts*? When it's 'Toy Story* 5: Just A Bunch Of Mad Shit'.

**Woody and Buzz aren't available.*

THUNDERBOLTS* IS IN CINEMAS FROM 1 MAY

TRIGGER POINT

BRUTAL POST-APOCALYPTIC DRAMA **THE LAST OF US** WAS A SPECTACULAR SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM. BUT AS WE FIND OUT ON SET OF SEASON 2, ALL HELL IS ABOUT TO BREAK LOOSE... WORDS **DAN JOLIN**

"PLEASE DO NOT STEP IN THE BLOOD," A CREW-MEMBER INSTRUCTS *EMPIRE*.

This requires some careful footwork: there is quite a lot of the sticky red stuff puddled around the floor. And, oh, there's a severed leg. It is lying not too far from a body we presume it once belonged to. Well, half a body. Its entrails cascade from its torso, and there is a disturbing look of surprise on its gaping face. Judging by the blood-trail that snakes away from this SFX horror, it appears it's been dragged into this dark, dank, industrial hellscape in which we've found ourselves. By someone — or some*thing*.

"I'm sorry we've brought you to an old, abandoned factory," apologises Craig Mazin, co-showrunner of *The Last Of Us*. It's the middle of July in Vancouver, and Day 150 of production on the second season. But the warmth and light of the Canadian summer cannot reach where we've found him, in the belly of a defunct milk-bottling facility which hunches in a flyover's long shadow. The ceilings are oppressively low; the walls are bare, grey concrete; the floors are panelled with metal. It is an ugly, lonely and profoundly desolate place, even before you get to the scattered viscera.

For this is the late 2020s and the fungal apocalypse — overseen by Mazin alongside fellow showrunner and *The Last Of Us* video-game creator Neil Druckmann — is still in full swing. As it should be: the first season was a colossal hit, a cultural phenomenon, even. HBO's most-watched debut season and winner of eight Emmys, it's fair to say it finally, spectacularly broke the video-game adaptation curse, smartly giving more attention to the palpable human impact of its nightmarish pandemic than the zombie-like, cordyceps-mutated creatures it spawned.

While we appreciate Mazin's apology, it's entirely appropriate that he should have brought us somewhere so cold, so dingy, so grisly. Because if you thought the first nine episodes were a rough ride, you ain't seen nothing yet. As Bella Ramsey, aka teenage survivor Ellie, warns *Empire*: you better "strap in".

When we last saw Ellie, she had just been rescued from a surgical demise by her protector-turned-surrogate-father Joel (Pedro Pascal). Except, the surgery was intended to extract from her — as apparently the only living person immune to cordyceps infection — the key to saving our species. Plus, the rescue involved the massacre of an entire hospital's worth of medical staff. A fact that Joel kept from Ellie with the lie that the procedure was simply unsuccessful, and that there are other immune people out there. It was a devastating finale which encouraged strongly conflicted emotions with its happy-question-mark ending.

Above, left to right: Kaitlyn Dever joins the cast as Abby; Newbie Isabela Merced as Dina, alongside the returning Pedro Pascal. **Left, top to bottom:** Red light spells danger; Run!

Similar to the PlayStation game on which this season is based (2020's *The Last Of Us Part II*), the story picks up five years later. "Joel and Ellie are living in Jackson, Wyoming, and have been safe and sound and part of a large community," explains Mazin. "But there is of course the lie that Joel told, and Ellie accepted. Yet as you grow older and transition from a child to an adult, you start to question things, and that's where we find them. Everything that happens can be tracked back to what happened before, which is exactly how things work in life: cause and effect, actions and consequences. And above all, a testing of their relationship."

Anybody looking forward to the return of Ramsey and Pascal's audience-winning double-act chemistry will be in for the first of many shocks. "Ellie has really pulled away from being a daughter," says Ramsey. "I don't think she enjoys that anymore. She's finding her independence and finding who she is." So while Ramsey was delighted to be back with Pascal after a two-year break, there was a bittersweet tinge to the reunion. "Because so much of Season 1 was us just being silly together [between takes] and having this father-daughter vibe, it felt kind of sad to do these scenes where Ellie's feeling cold towards Joel."

This sentiment is echoed by Pascal, who, when we speak in late January, says it was something of a "painful" reunion, "because we're so together in the first season and we're so apart in the second. That was hard." He gives a long sigh. "If I were to indulge my melancholy a little, I remember thinking, 'I want to go back to the beginning.' Just to experience the whole thing again and not lose any time being shy with one another, because of how special it felt to me, and how unready I was to move on from it."

One reason Ellie has detached from Joel is thankfully positive: she's fallen for Dina, a fellow Jackson resident, played by *Alien: Romulus*' Isabela Merced, who brings a bright, cheery presence to the otherwise dire proceedings. "It was quite enjoyable for me," says Merced of joining the show and forming a new duo with Ramsey. "I do think that in the middle of an apocalypse, I would be the first one cracking jokes at the most inappropriate times, because humour is my coping mechanism. So I find ›

Dina to be really relatable."

But she's not the only new character to drastically affect the Joel-Ellie dynamic. There is also Abby. A young woman arriving in Jackson from a very different trajectory to Dina, it's safe to say she won't be cracking many jokes. Played by Kaitlyn Dever, she has suffered great personal loss and channelled her grief into an acute thirst for revenge. "Abby has a very intense energy, as someone that's really experienced a lot of tragedy," says Dever. "She's a very broken person and is driven by that."

If, as Mazin says, this season examines "actions and consequences", then Abby is an agent of consequence, whose actions in the game made her its most divisive character — to the degree that original voice-actor Laura Bailey received death threats from some players.

"I am aware of the Abby controversy, for sure," says Dever. "You Google 'Abby Anderson' and you see all of it. It's hard not to see it. But it wasn't something I wanted to be stressed out over, just because I would be distracted from getting into the character and her emotional journey. I wanted to take it on as a new point of view and come at it with fresh eyes. Craig and Neil are not just making a copy of the game. That was something that really stood out to me in my first meeting with them: they want the emotional essence of these characters to come alive in the TV show."

This was why Dever wasn't required to buff up so much as Abby does in the game. And while she did quite a bit of training, it was tragically curtailed by events at home. "My mom passed away right as I was in the middle of going back and forth between LA and Vancouver," Dever tells *Empire*. "So it became a very difficult time for me. I had to shoot my first day on set three days after my mom's funeral. I was like, 'How am I going to be able to do this?'" Given she's playing someone driven to extremity by her own loss, we can only imagine how tough that must have been. "But I needed to do it for my mom, who was so excited that I booked this role. It was the hardest time in my life, but I was also doing this dream job, and I can't even tell you how taken care of I felt. Craig and everybody in the crew treated me with such empathy."

The *Booksmart* star has history with Druckmann's game studio Naughty Dog. She was (via voice performance and motion capture) Nathan Drake's daughter in the Druckmann-directed *Uncharted 4*, and once almost played Ellie in an aborted movie adaptation of *The Last Of Us*, even performing her at a script table-read. HBO's Ellie heartily approves of the casting of their new co-lead. "Kaitlyn really killed it," says Ramsay. Pascal concurs. "How brilliant of Craig to ask her to do it. Because, as far as what her relationship to Joel is and means... if you know, you *know*. And to be able to have such a wonderful, warm, talented scene partner to play out a very dark thing was a gift."

Of course, dark things come in many different forms. For all the show's human dramas, there are also its clicking, lurching, fungal monsters. And this time, they're worse.

Back in the depths of that concrete husk of a factory, Merced's Dina is facing a new kind of infected. She's shut herself into a steel-mesh cage, on which this fresh threat converges. Unlike the clickers of the first season, these cordyceps-consumed creatures act in a more coordinated manner, leaping ferally at the cage, gnashing and pulling at its panels, while Merced takes desperate shots at them with a prop pistol that emits a silent flash with each trigger-pull.

Unlike the 'clickers', each of these

Far left: Dina brings a new happiness for Ellie (Bella Ramsey). **Left, top to bottom:** Co-showrunners Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann with Pascal on set; A cautious Ellie on the move; Gabriel Luna as Joel's brother Tommy; New threat the 'stalker', with monstrous 'antlers'; Strength in numbers.

once-human 'stalkers' retains its eyes and most of its facial features but, via some gruesomely impressive prosthetics work supervised by Paul Spateri (an Emmy-winner for Season 1), has several fungal tendrils poking out of its head, like hideous antlers. "Now you get to see a different evolution of this infection," says Neil Druckmann. "It's kept certain parts of their brain alive, so they are smarter. They coordinate and hide and do things that we've never seen any other infected do on this show."

The stalkers are emblematic of the way *The Last Of Us* has expanded for its much-anticipated return. "While Neil and I are, I think, very good at not chasing critique, there are times when our instincts do happen to align with some of the requests we get," says Mazin. "All I'll say is that for the people who want to see more of the infected... Buckle up!" Pascal observes that "it's definitely a bigger, far more ambitious and risk-taking season. And, if it can even be imagined, further tests our strength against a world we're already afraid to be in."

Many of those tests are physical. "I was pretty sore most of the time," says Dever. "Every other day was a stunt day," says Ramsey. However, she continues, Season 2 is exacting in another way — for both the performers and the audience. "It's definitely more emotionally challenging. There's quite a lot of conflict as to how you're supposed to feel about Ellie and the other characters."

Druckmann's been here before, with *The Last Of Us Part II*. "I knew for a fact that the story we were telling was going to make some of our biggest fans angry with us," he says of the video-game sequel, whose themes of retribution and the cycle of violence were inspired, in part, by his own experiences growing up in Israel. "But I felt like it was a story worth telling, so we were going to do it anyways. And that's gonna be the case for the show. There's gonna be people that love Season 1 and will not like certain aspects of Season 2, and other people that will come along and say, 'I'm in for this journey, and I know this world affords a certain kind of hurt, and pain, and joy.' It's an exploration of the beauty and horror of humanity and love. And that's what we're continuing to do in the second season."

In short, shock and upset come with the mycelium-infested territory. "When you bring these characters back to the world of *The Last Of Us*, it's not just gonna be 'Kumbaya' and watching them play soccer all day," Druckmann continues. "Bad things are gonna happen."

To Mazin, one of Season 2's core themes is the troublesome concept of heroism. "The problem with the hero is they're only the hero if they're the hero," he says. "But if you're somebody else in that story, they could just as easily be the villain. It's rare to see something where you're asked to see things from multiple points of view and you do not get an easy answer over whose love is better and whose love is right." Yet, it seems, it's here we may find a glimmer of light. "The real question we start to investigate in this season, is, 'What is the way out of all this?' Like, 'Mmm. Okay. This is where we've gotten because of our desire to care for the people we love. This is a bad situation. How does this end?'"

Mazin is well practised in handling gloomy material, having previously showrun HBO mini-series *Chernobyl*. There is a value, he believes, to taking audiences to dark places, even during dark times. "That's why drama exists," he says, "to give us an inoculated space to experience grief, loss, fear, anger, a desire to do violence, a desire to protect. All these things get displayed to us in a way that, going right back to the Greeks, will be cathartic. Listen: we made a show [Season 1] about an apocalyptic pandemic in the middle of an apocalyptic pandemic! If there was ever going to be anything that would make people not want to see it, that would have been it! And it was quite the opposite."

Druckmann has had similar experiences. "It's always surprising how many people come up to us and say, 'This game or this show helped me through a really dark time,'" he tells us. And it may help for some time yet. This might not be the last of *The Last Of Us*.

Six months after our delightful stalker encounter, *Empire* catches up with the two showrunners. They are still in the whirlwind of post-production, having only recently completed a third round of additional shooting. "We are excited and exhausted," says Mazin. He slumps theatrically in his seat. "With the scope of the show and the things that happen, the production is enormous." He pauses, as if struggling to encompass it all. "The events required *size*. I don't know how else to put it."

While he says a third season has yet to be confirmed, Mazin assures us the story will be far from over by the end of this seven-episode run. "What we're contemplating is two more seasons, I think, but we have to figure it out and decide how it ought to roll, so we can't say that exactly. All I can confirm for sure is that there is more story to tell. This is not a place where we've run out of story and have to start making new story. There's more to adapt from the game."

But, unlike a certain other apocalyptic zombie show, it's not going to shamble on indefinitely. "I don't feel like flying past the runway that Neil's built," says Mazin.

"We need the destination," Druckmann asserts. "I think we would struggle to do a show that just keeps going forever."

If all goes to plan, though, there will be plenty more shocks, conflicts and heartbreaks to come before we reach that destination. And plenty more puddles of blood.

THE LAST OF US **SEASON 2 IS ON SKY AND NOW FROM 14 APRIL**

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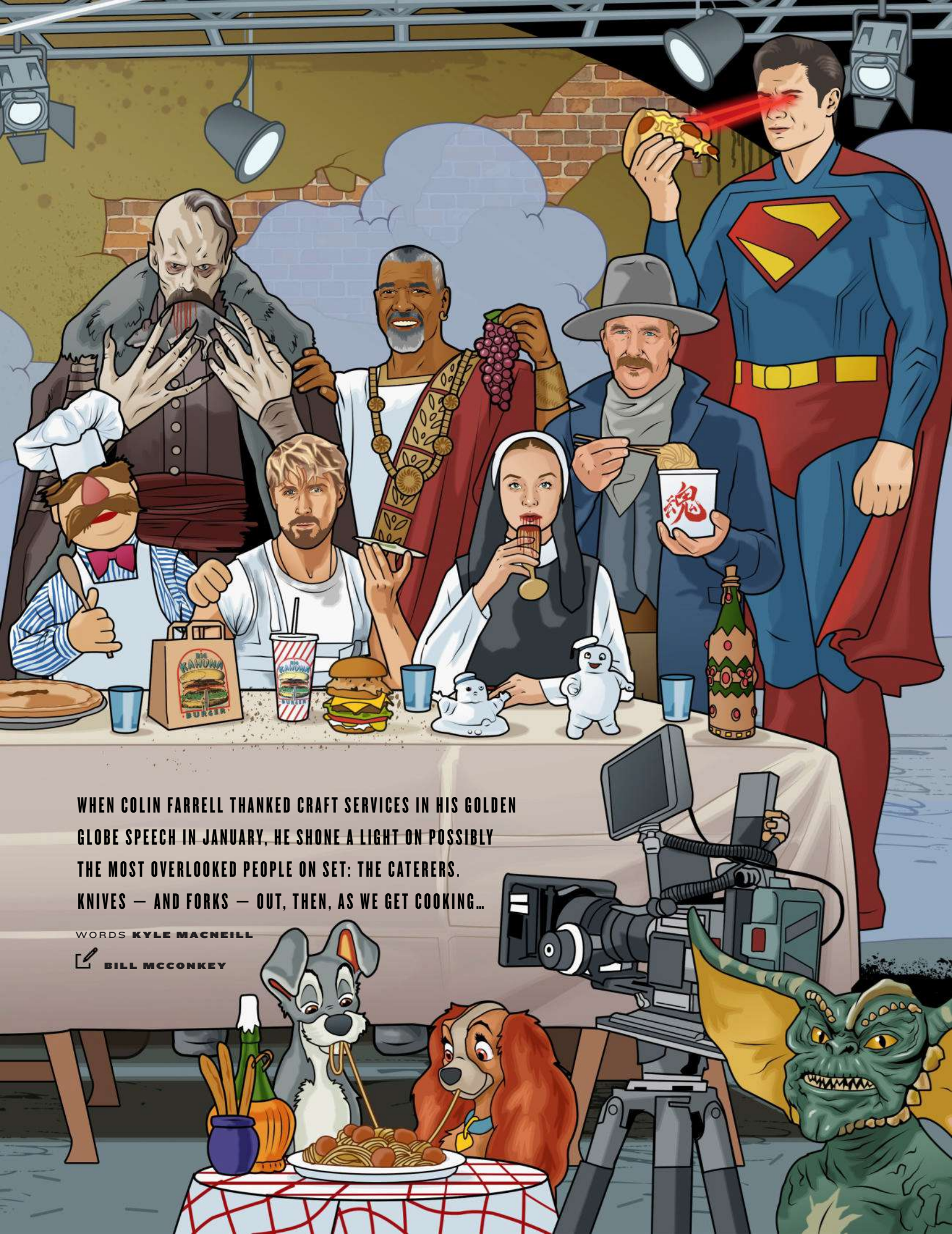


WHEN COLIN FARRELL THANKED CRAFT SERVICES IN HIS GOLDEN GLOBE SPEECH IN JANUARY, HE SHONE A LIGHT ON POSSIBLY THE MOST OVERLOOKED PEOPLE ON SET: THE CATERERS. KNIVES — AND FORKS — OUT, THEN, AS WE GET COOKING…

WORDS **KYLE MACNEILL**

BILL MCCONKEY

IT IS, IT TURNS OUT, *NOT* A WRAP.

"Not wraps, no. It's paninis we need," says Chris Blyth, after one of his chefs checks whether they need to get tortillas or ciabattas from their mobile larder. *Empire* is at Warner Bros. Studios Leavesden with Hot Goblin, a catering company owned by Blyth that has worked on productions including *The Crown*, *Peep Show* and *Call The Midwife*. His team is cooking for the 400-strong cast of *The Franchise*: last year's HBO metadrama following a film crew's less-than-heroic attempts to make a superhero movie. "There are actors playing runners next to runners helping actors," Blyth says. Luckily, he confirms, they're not in competition with any pretend caterers.

A rainbow has arched its way across the sky, leading not to pots of gold, but to industrial-sized stock pots of king prawn linguine, aubergine tagine and chicken katsu curry, all rustled up in a fleet of vans. "We're a well-oiled machine now," Blyth says, destoning a vat of avocados. Alongside a full fry-up breakfast — which it's only polite to partake in — there's a spread of cereals, toast and fruit made for grazing, plus an omelette station. "Ben's in charge of omelettes. He's a showman," Blyth jokes, explaining that Anthony Hopkins liked them so much, he got one of the chefs to make one for a scene in *The Father* (Hopkins also liked his salmon very, very, very well-done).

Suddenly, a fireball behind us erupts into the sky. Luckily, it wasn't the deep-fat fryer going up in flames. "That was dramatic!" Blyth roars over the superhero din.

Welcome to the world of the film and TV catering industry, where the unofficial tagline seems to be, "You are only as good as your last meal." It consists of a small group of UK-based location caterers — including Hot Goblin and the likes of Red Chutney, Fayre Dos and Chorley Bunce — who make a living by feeding the stars. These catering services work side-by-side with craft services — known affectionately as 'crafty' — who sort the snacks, tea, coffee and gossip. And they're priceless. At January's Golden Globes, Colin Farrell thanked "Carolina" in "craft service" for keeping the "whole [*The Penguin*] crew going... on those cold winter nights in New York" with an endless cascade of coconut water. ("Never ever stop working with passion and love," she later responded, "because at the end, everything will taste delicious.")

Setting up on set and carting kitchens onto location, these caterers and crafties are there from the first to the final clack of the clapperboard. Many of them have been around for decades, consisting of seasoned pros used to performing under pressure and catering to the demands of top actors. But it wasn't always such a mobile operation.

Back in the Golden Age of Hollywood, it looked a little different; actors, when they weren't eating in their hotels or at swanky Beverly Hills restaurants, mainly ate in studio commissaries — fancy canteens made for mingling and dining with enormous offerings. A dusted-down menu of Warner Bros. Studio Cafe from 1941, for example, reveals a sprawling selection of everything from steak your-way to Boston baked beans to crab leg cocktails, all washed down

Courtesy of Christopher Blythe at Hot Goblin and Paul Harling at Film Star Chef; Alamy; Getty Images; HBO; Lionsgate; Sony

with a bottle of beer. The Manager's Special Sandwich? Peanut butter, baked ham and chicken on toast. Cut!

From the 1960s onwards, though, these glitzy kitchens with their kitsch menus gradually gave way to food trucks. Most major studios still have a permanent on-site canteen, usually operated by a multinational catering company, but they also dish out temporary contracts to mobile caterers who either park up at a unit base or go on location for the duration of a film shoot.

Around the same time as Blyth started Hot Goblin, Dave Chorley was slicing peppers for celeb chef Ken Hom's TV slots. While on set, he came across a catering van and took down its details. "I rang them up. The following week, I was working on *Robin Hood* cooking Japanese food for Kevin Costner," he says. Here, he met Mark Bunce and they hit it off, starting working together on Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element*. "I found myself in a room with Luke Perry, Jean Paul Gaultier and Bruce Willis working out how to do the McDonald's drive-through scene and feed the actors playing the aliens while they were in the costumes," he remembers.

The process itself hasn't changed much; it's still all about word of mouth. And hard graft. Film caterers have to get up at the crack of dawn and start cracking eggs at 5am, ready to serve breakfast a couple of hours later. "The caterers, who are *actually* the first to arrive [on set] at some ungodly hour, begin cooking two meals for a minimum of about 50 people every day," writes actor and gastronomy enthusiast Stanley Tucci in his book *Taste*. The quantities are often far bigger, sometimes in the hundreds. For the likes of *Game Of Thrones*, the very nominatively determined Jamie Cook tells *Empire*, it would go up to the thousands.

And the practical challenges are absolutely mega. "The logistics of handing over a plate of healthy, tasty food to a crew member is quite staggering," Chorley says, reeling off the need for constant MOTs, gallons of propane gas bottles, monolithic generators, hundreds of litres of water and flammable gel to keep the food warm.

When filming on set, the main issue is timing: delivering the food late means mucking up the entire filming schedule. But cooking on location is far more testing, especially when it's somewhere remote; the caterers *Empire* spoke to have had to contend with cheffing in deserts, tundras, beaches and forests. "We had to put food on ski lifts for Bond, delivering hot food on snow-caps," says Red Chutney's Fiona Gilbert. Bunce, meanwhile, was left quivering after an accidental archery attack: "We were serving food on *Robin Hood* and had set up in the wrong area. All of a sudden, thousands of arrows were in the sky heading towards us and bouncing off the food. We've still got a few as souvenirs in the office."

Now, there are new challenges. Film catering has become increasingly hand-to-mouth: Covid-19 and then the SAG-AFTRA strike have led to new practices and a huge chunk of work disappearing. Then, there are the ever-changing palates of actors, who are wanting healthier, greener options; on set of *The Franchise*, Hot Goblin's chalkboard even contains the carbon footprint for each dish.

Trickier still are the allergies. All gazillion of them. "People are inventing new ones all the time!" laughs Paul Harling, a personal chef who works on sets. "Sometimes, I'm sent ten pages of what an actor can or can't eat." Other times, it's related to anxiety. "We have to ensure certain foods are discreetly served or omitted from communal dining areas. Food phobias can even include aversions to baked beans," Bunce says.

The psychology of food is a big deal on set. You are what you eat, sure — but you also *act* what you eat. ›

Facing page, clockwise from top left: Hot Goblin at work; Grace Kelly, in red, eats in the studio canteen, c. 1954 — Elizabeth Taylor is at the table behind; Hot Goblin with Anthony Hopkins; Colin Farrell thanking "Carolina from craft service"; Hot Goblin's omelette in *The Father*; Lunch by personal chef Paul Harling. **This page, clockwise from top left:** An industry eatery; A-list eats; *The Franchise*, catered by Hot Goblin; *Fury*'s army marches on its stomach; Custom-made; Maureen O'Hara and Anthony Quinn lunch on set of *Sinbad The Sailor*, 1946; Baps to the stars.

This page, clockwise from top left: Paul Harling on location in Fuerteventura; Avocado on toast — up to 11; A bespoke Christmas cake for the *Fury* cast and crew; Hot Goblin cook up a storm on Charing Cross' old Jubilee Line platform for *The Good Liar*; A picture-perfect protein boost; Harling's set-up for *The Old Guard*'s Moroccan shoot; *The Fall Guy* — catered by 'Ryan Gozeleme'. **Facing page, clockwise from main:** Marion Davies and Dell Henderson grab lunch in a scene from 1928's *Show People*; Good enough to, well, eat; Another Hot Goblin joint.

For actor Tim Downie, who has appeared in the likes of *Paddington* (as British bear researcher Montgomery Clyde) and *Toast Of London* (as Danny Bear, mate of Clem Fandango), eating on set is paramount. In an episode of *How To Make It With Emily & Haley*, a podcast about the entertainment industry, he even declares that the title of his career so far would be: 'Please Tell Me The Catering's Good'. "Being on a film set is a bit like being at school. You arrive full of excitement and the one thing everyone's talking about is lunch and how good the catering is," he says. The quality can vary wildly. As Tucci writes in *Taste*, "Eating catered food on movie sets is often a terrifying prospect. Basically, the way it works is, the bigger the budget, the better the food."

On a basic level, it's fuel. "It's like running an army. In the Napoleonic sense it runs on its stomach," Downie says. But it's also something to look forward to. "If you're doing a searing kitchen-sink drama, imagine how much worse it is if you think, 'I've got to get through all of this, then I'll be faced with some sort of dry chicken Kyiv,'" he continues. But you have to make your choices carefully. "You might see the best lasagne you have ever seen but if you have a lot of running and jumping to do, that's not for you, my friend. And if you're doing a comedy that requires energy and timing you don't want to be loaded up on chocolate bars or gallons of coffee. It's a minefield."

Downie believes the food can genuinely affect the calibre of the performance. "I have a friend who says they can sit down and watch a production and tell you from the way the actors are performing how good the catering was," he says. Creating a chef-d'oeuvre as an actor or an auteur, it seems, might actually be down to what you've devoured from the chef.

There's a lot at stake when it comes to film catering; actors expect Certified Fresh food, not rotten tomatoes. For the crew, it's a rare break. "It's the only downtime they get, really. It's pretty full on. So it's really important that it's enjoyable and a bit of fun. I used to make all sorts of juices and come up with silly names, like a fiery beetroot one called Dragon's Blood," Harling says. Caterers also act as a kind of counselling service, letting crew members vent. "You do get that on some of the jobs. They come up and gossip," says Blyth.

Sometimes the actors even get involved themselves to let off some steam. Legend has it that this went way too far on the *Titanic* set; the story goes that a chowder was spiked with the dissociative PCP during filming, leading to 80 people ending up in hospital. But most of the time, it's more about harmless capers. One crew member on *The Fall Guy*, who wants to remain anonymous, says that Ryan Gosling personally hired a local gözleme business called Ryan Gozeleme to make lunch. "It was great," he says. "He did it maybe five or six times over the course of the shoot with other food trucks. There was even that 'Hey girl' meme of him saying, 'Hey girl, lunch is on me today' printed out and stuck around the set."

And Gosling isn't the only leading man to play caterer. "One time while working on *Gravity* we were serving lunch when I was aware of somebody coming in the kitchen," Bunce remembers. "I did a double take and saw it was George Clooney, who put an apron on and started to help serve the crew. I don't know if the queue wasn't going down quick enough for him or he just wanted a bit of fun, but his assistants were looking very stressed and were telling him to come out, obviously trying to avoid anything happening to him."

But when the biggest names aren't masquerading as sous chefs, they're also, if they're lucky, being fed by their very own *personal* chefs.

Paul Harling didn't ever expect to be flinging protein balls at Brad Pitt.

"I was working on 2017's *War Machine*," he tells us. "The actors were going on a kind of keto diet and wanted to bulk up. So I created my own protein balls out of peanuts and cacao. Every day, I'd go out in the mud and throw them up at the tanks." Harling, like Blyth, began in the world of music, cooking for Sting. "I got an email from Brad Pitt's PA asking if I fancied cooking for him," he says, explaining he thought it was a scam. It was the real deal; Harling was soon on the set of 2014's *Fury*, cooking for the six main cast members.

"It was bizarre. I didn't know what the requirements were. So I started off with a Chinese lunch and then thought: 'Why don't I do a different country every day?'" He kept this up for weeks, cooking around the world in 65 days. "I used to turn up to Brad Pitt's trailer with lunch and he'd say, 'Okay, Paul, where are we going today?'" Since then, as well as several other Pitt flicks, Harling has worked on the likes of *Mission: Impossible*, *Spider-Man*, *Back To Black* and as a vegan chef on *Cats*.

As a personal chef, Harling cooks for the biggest names. "We usually cater for about six members of the cast, like numbers one to five [the biggest stars] and the director," he explains. And is there envy in the food chain? "Definitely. I get given strict instructions about who I'm allowed to cook for. I had Clint Eastwood's son come up to me and ask for me to cater for him. He looked identical to Clint. I said he'd have to ask cast member number one."

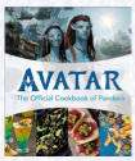
By all accounts, though, the big-name actors don't cause a culinary fuss; it's often the supporting artists, rather than the stars, who act up. "Hugh Grant will drive himself to work and come and get his own food. But sometimes it's the ones you don't really know who are [difficult]. On one film, cast member 254 had all these demands," Paul, a Hot Goblin caterer, laughs.

Of course, their performance isn't always up to scratch. On Instagram, @SadCrewLunches documents the bleakest examples, complete with anagrams hinting at the production. But, while all the caterers admit to having the odd off-day, they all work hard to cook the best food they can, with an insatiable appetite to deliver more. "We all strive to keep ourselves relevant in the industry and make sure we do a good job," Fiona Gilbert says. It's not just the actors that get stage fright. "Every single day, I get nervous," admits Blyth. "We've got a responsibility to provide good food."

Film catering is certainly not easy; the early hours, the low budgets, the cast member 254s. It's why Gilbert compares it to Marmite: "You either love it or you hate it," she says. But for those that can stomach it, it's a thrill worth working for. The decadent dining rooms of the '60s might be long gone, but the role of the film caterer is vital: they fuel Oscar-winning performances, offer a mobile counselling service and even act as extras along the way. So if you're looking to get a taste of how good a new movie is, don't bother watching the trailer. The name on the kitchen trailer tells you everything you need to know.

SCREEN BITES

PRESENTING THE TENUOUS WORLD OF MOVIE AND TV COOKBOOKS

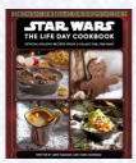


AVATAR: THE OFFICIAL COOKBOOK OF PANDORA

Want to eat like a Na'vi? Now's your chance, with a selection of recipes inspired by James Cameron's blue moon. 'The damp rainforests of Pandora provide the Na'vi with plenty of fungi,' reads the introduction to the Ovumshroom Burger. Which is suspiciously like a mushroom burger, should you wish to eat a mushroom burger.

THE UNOFFICIAL STRANGER THINGS COOKBOOK

Head to 1980s Hawkins, via Stranger Wings, Hopper's Doughnuts, the Upside Down Burger and, erm, French Toast Jonathan Style ("to keep Jonathan fuelled all day"). Jesus wept. Full marks, though, for the Demogorgonzola.



STAR WARS: THE LIFE DAY COOKBOOK

The *Star Wars Holiday Special* truly is the gift that keeps on giving. Here, then, are recipes for galactic feasts, including Spiced Bogwings, Pickled Mynock, Eopie Roast and Bantha Surprise (Surprise! It's basically meat stew).

THE UNOFFICIAL BEETLEJUICE! BEETLEJUICE! BETTLEJUICE! COOKBOOK

Say his name three times and an exceedingly unofficial food-related tie-in will appear in your kitchen. Somehow, 75 recipes are contained within, such as a (Un)Holy Guacamole, Scary Face Charcuterie and Showstopper Shrimp Cocktail. It must be said, though: 'My Life is One Big, Dark Mousse' is inspired. **ALEX GODFREY**

CONFIDENCE MAN

FROM *BREAKING BAD* TO *THE MANDALORIAN* AND NOW *THE ELECTRIC STATE*, GIANCARLO ESPOSITO'S CHARACTERS ARE AS STRONG-WILLED AS IT GETS.

WORDS
AMON WARMANN

ROBERT ASCROFT

AS WE DISCOVER OVER A NO-HOLDS-BARRED CONVERSATION, THIS IS NO ACCIDENT — AND NO COINCIDENCE...

Giancarlo Esposito, photographed exclusively for *Empire* in Los Angeles on 17 February 2025.

"MY **INTENTION** IS TO SIT HERE AND TELL YOU **ALL** OF WHO I AM."

It's not a sentiment one often hears expressed in an interview. It's an even rarer thing for it to be meant, and felt. But that's exactly the brand of direct, open honesty you get when you talk to Giancarlo Esposito. It's part of his nature.

Esposito has long been that reassuringly reliable character actor who will always improve a project by a factor of approximately 27 per cent every minute he's on screen. Roles in iconic films like *Do The Right Thing*, *The Usual Suspects* and *Malcolm X* were early indicators of his limitless talent. But it was his turn as the calm and collected drug kingpin Gus Fring in Vince Gilligan's hit drama *Breaking Bad* (and later, *Better Call Saul*) that kicked his sputtering career into high gear, earned him much-deserved acclaim, and changed the trajectory of his life. It was the first of many roles that cast him as classy, complex and formidable bad guys in everything from *The Mandalorian* to *The Boys* and, more recently, *Captain America: Brave New World* and *The Electric State*.

In conversation, Esposito is far less intense than the characters he tends to play: our tête-à-tête features spot-on impersonations of Spike Lee, Laurence Fishburne and Anthony Hopkins, the occasional in-character line reading, and a whole lot of truth-telling on the industry, and himself. After nearly half a century in the business, he's earned the right to be as sure of himself as he is. And with a memoir on the way, he's more willing than ever to talk about "the good, the bad, the ugly, and the treacherous" moments of his singular journey.

Spike Lee calls you G-Money. Where did that nickname come from?

Do The Right Thing came up and Spike offered me a certain amount of money. I was willing to take it until I found out that there were others in the cast who were making more. I, with courage, said, "Spike, come on now. That's not gonna cut it." And he laughed at me, and we went back and forth. Then he came back and said, "I got you." I said, "Where'd you get it?" He said, "I took it from my sister. Got it from Joie's pile!" And I said, "Oh, man!" But he said, "It's cool!" and then he said "G-Money!" and that was it. I think it was a really great sign of respect, and then that endeared us to each other. Spike has taught me so much, I gotta tell you. He's an incredible businessman, and he does it with grace and aplomb. It was at that point in my life that I realised there's a value on my talent.

Before that, he'd cast you in *School Daze* (1988). He'd seen you on stage on Broadway [in 1980's *Zooman And The Sign*]. So this was very early on in your career. What did that creative partnership teach you?

It gave me confidence. It taught me to have courage and to be a creator. Spike had a vision. And when I could sit down with him and say, "I have ideas," and share that with him, he would respect that and take those into consideration in his rewrite. Allowing me to do what I felt like I could do the best was really a wonderful thing. So it was empowering.

He was writing images of African-Americans that we hadn't seen or experienced [in cinema]. And these were whole and complete characters and people with a range of emotions, from the shame of the colour of their skin to the pride of it, to the looking down on light-skinned [or] dark-skinned Blacks... *School Daze* was all about that. And it allowed me to access and feel and exercise some of the feelings I had when I came to this country, being half-Italian and half-Black; I was *mulatto*. So Spike opened my eyes to understand not only the African-American historical connection that I come from and to honour that with grace and aplomb and cherish it and speak about it, but also my multi-racial ethnicity.

Top to bottom: Esposito and Laurence Fishburne in *School Daze* (1988); With Spike Lee in the same film; As Buggin' Out in *Do The Right Thing* (1989).

You worked with Laurence Fishburne in *School Daze*, and in the '80s you lived with him. Though he was going by 'Larry' at the time...

I'll tell you right now, if you see Laurence now, don't call him Larry!

Ha! Noted. You were two Black men in Hollywood trying to make it. What were those years like?

Laurence and I are like brothers. We recently worked together in Francis Ford Coppola's *Megalopolis*. [But] those [early] years were lean. Those years were of struggle. He was on a work search, I was on a work search. I met him on an audition for, I believe, [1979's] *The Warriors*. He was living down on Vignes Street down in Los Angeles — which was a very rough neighbourhood back then — trying to rehab a loft that was unfinished. His idea was that we could share it and put it together. We literally had no door on the apartment, it was boarded up. We were climbing on little makeshift steps and cans to get in through the window. We literally had no bathroom. We were pissing and shitting in white buckets and throwing it out the window. It was a mess, and we were both trying to find work. We're very close, but those years were hard because we were going up for the same kind of gigs, too. But we were never jealous of each other. We'd walk into the room for the same role but it didn't matter, because he and I both knew that if the role was for me, I would get it; if the role was for him, he would get it. We've been cultivating our relationship and work ethic for many years.

After making a few films with Spike, you had a period in the early noughties when things weren't so great. Was your life impacting your career choices?

At that period of time, prior to *Breaking Bad* [in 2009], I was bankrupt with two kids and another one on the way. I had to take everything I could get; I was desperate. I was married and my former wife looked at my career and said, "Don't take anything that would compromise you, no matter what reason, even though we're in this struggle." It was a very difficult moment in time where I was considering knocking myself off, because my former wife's father was in insurance, she had some insurance on me, ›

Previous page: Full look: WAX London; Black suede boots: Scarosso.
This page: Leather jacket: ISAIA

"I DIDN'T WANT TO PLAY **THE BAD GUY OF THE WEEK**. I WANTED TO PLAY CHARACTERS THAT WERE **DEEPENED** AND **CULTIVATED**."

and at that point in time, I didn't think survival was going to be an option for me, because I had these children who I wanted to survive *me*. And if I couldn't provide for them because I couldn't get work, then it was a problem.

What was the turning point?
Those horrible thoughts went through my brain, until a neighbour gave me a book called *Who Moved My Cheese?*, and I reconnected to the warrior part of me that is about what we do as men. You know, women are [at] home, nurturing the children; men are the hunter-gatherers who go out and have to reinvent themselves over and over again to find that cheese. It was a book about a little mouse, and I was like, "Why is this guy giving me this book? I'm depressed. I need therapy, I need a job." And I read this book, and got the message of it. It was really a mental-health book. It was about me learning how to recreate my life and who I am, and it lit a fire in my belly. The fire was already there, but it allowed me some hope. And then *Breaking Bad* came along.

What were your initial conversations like with Vince Gilligan about Gus Fring?
I wanted to know what his ideas were for the character, and I wanted him to hear me that

Below, left to right: *Breaking Bad:* it's a Gus Fring kinda thing; Moff Gideon in *The Mandalorian*.

I didn't want to play the bad guy of the week. I wanted to play characters that were deepened and cultivated. I said to him, "You've had a villain of the week that's worked well for you, but now you need a formidable villain. You need someone to stand up against Walter White and be subtle and nuanced. Something you haven't seen before." And Vince was game for that. And I started to take the words away from being in a room with Vince suggesting stuff, to giving a performance in-between the lines that you could *see.* That was *palpable.* All that stuff that you could see in my eyes and feel in my heart. And week to week, they started writing in stuff that they saw, and it was the true testament of a really wonderful collaboration.

With all the traction and awards attention you were gaining with *Breaking Bad*, did it feel vindicating? You bet on yourself and it paid off.
I don't have time to be vindicated. I don't have time to be in the glory of the feeling of triumph and success. Because I'm working my butt off! At one point I was doing *Dear White People*, *The Godfather Of Harlem* and *The Boys* all at one time. So I didn't have time to sort of stop and go, "I'm back there with Gustavo." *Breaking Bad* blew up to such a level that people would call me Gus on the street. And now people come up to me and call me a legend. I don't know where to put that. I guess it's because there are a number of characters I've created that stick with you. But that's what I always wanted. So I don't mind being called Buggin' Out, or Gustavo, or [*The Mandalorian*'s] Moff Gideon, who was so wonderful to create as well.

How did Moff relate to what you'd been through in life? What did you like exploring about him?
I had a friendship with James Earl Jones; he inspired me my whole career. Mentors like Jimmy Jones and Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier, they were the actors that I wanted to embody, to encompass their feeling and power and joy and intellect. So I said, "I must have a cape." And I got the cape. Moff Gideon, to me, was ultimately that young boy who never had any power, who was always questioned about the colour of his skin. "Are you white? Are you Black? Your hair is kind of curly?" And he then took on this place for me, where he was ultimately *the* power, not only because of his physicality but because of his *brain*. (*Moff Gideon voice*) "Assume I know *everything*." Who says that? The way he spoke, and everything else which I was able to create in such a powerful way, empowered me to control the chaos around me.

When do you think we'll see him again?
I don't know. There is a big movie coming out that's focusing on Mando and The Child. I can't say it'll be that. But I hope to be able to join that franchise again, because I think there's more road for Moff Gideon.

You recently joined the MCU in *Captain America: Brave New World*. You've been talking with Marvel for a decade, so what was it about Seth Voelker — aka Sidewinder — that made you want to play him?
It was supposed to come out in March of 2024, and they decided they wanted to make some changes. I was on the phone with [producer] Nate Moore, who prepped me to be, possibly, a character called King Cobra, which I loved, because if I'm walking around the neighbourhood, African-Americans go, "What's up, King?" I love it. They call me King, baby! I mean, that's the highest honour. But as it turned out, there [are other Kings] in the Marvel world, and this was connected to the Serpent Society — they were going back to the comics and trying to figure it out, and Nate said, "We can give you all the characteristics of King, but we think he should be Sidewinder." And they spoke about creating a character that was really grounded, in a mercenary fashion. They wanted to ground the movie when they went back in to do some additional shooting, and their focus now was on this additional character. So it was a bit of a whirlwind for me. I focused myself and I went in there and knocked it out. And I'm hoping to be in this universe a little longer.

You bring a grounded humanity to *The Electric State* too, as Colonel Marshall Bradbury, otherwise known as The Butcher. There's always more going on under the surface of your villains.
With Colonel Bradbury, I felt like there was a character who had understood the world of politics and war and given it up, and was planting his garden at home and able to just be retired and be happy. He did his service, and he was really good at what he did, and he's called back into service and is kind of fooled by a big corporate gentleman [Stanley Tucci's Ethan Skate] who wants him to go after a rogue robot. My thing in my life is to have meritocracy, to strive to be the best at what I do with compassion, love, understanding and grace. The Butcher is the best at what he does. My work is my life. It's not just something that I do. It doesn't completely define me, because I have a life outside of it, but it's affected by the imprint of my life: if I'm doing what I do on the level I'd like to continue to do, it lends to the depth of the character. So The Butcher, Colonel Bradbury, is a very special character for me.

In 2019 you said, "I would fight to the death to play Hannibal Lecter." Is that still true? Did you get to talk about that with Anthony Hopkins when you made a guest appearance on *Westworld*?
Anthony Hopkins is an idol of mine. We never worked together directly on *Westworld*. When he was asked in an interview who might play [Lecter] again, without skipping a beat he said, "Giancarlo Esposito," because he was, and is, a big fan of *Breaking Bad*, and he saw in my performance the ability to be able to play Hannibal Lecter in a way that he would approve of.

A knock came on my door when I was getting ready to go to set [on *Westworld*] and I opened it and there's *Sir* Anthony Hopkins, bowing to me. And I looked up and caught those magnificent, glistening eyes, and I took his hand and said, "Come in." And we had a conversation in my trailer that lasted over an hour. We talked about art and humanity and acting and meditation and all these things. It overwhelmed me. We didn't talk much about Hannibal Lecter at all. It was two forces of nature getting together. And I'll never forget the subtleties of our conversation, because I felt like I'd met a human being I knew all my life. Another lifer in it because he loves it, will never stop doing it because he's a creator. And so that was a beautiful moment. And would I play Hannibal Lecter? Yes, I would love to. It would tap into the deepest, darkest part of my being to do that, but I would be willing to do that.

You've got a memoir coming up. What has the process of writing that been like? Why was now the right time to get reflective?
The process has been really wonderful, and painful, to go back through my life and career, my childhood and all else, to tell the truth about how I got to where I am today and where I want to go. It's been an exorcism. I think now is the right time for me, because I think I'm more honest in my view of who I really am. My audience know me from different facets of who I am, and [they] may think certain things about me, but if I'm not willing to share all of who I am with them, they're gonna know me as Gus, as Gideon, as Stan Edgar, as Buggin' Out. And they will know me as that, and that's perfectly fine. But when my expression is at a point where I can be *so* honest about who I've been... because the fear is that all that I've been, I am still. But the truth is that we grow and we change, and then we become different. And within that growth, we then have to accept ourselves for who we are today. So for me to realise that I'm not that, that who I am today is not who I was yesterday, and that's okay... then I can start to be really honest about all of me to all of you.

***THE ELECTRIC STATE* IS ON NETFLIX FROM 14 MARCH**

Below, clockwise from top left: As Sidewinder in *Captain America: Brave New World*; Esposito's El Lazo in *Westworld*; Playing The Butcher in *The Electric State*.

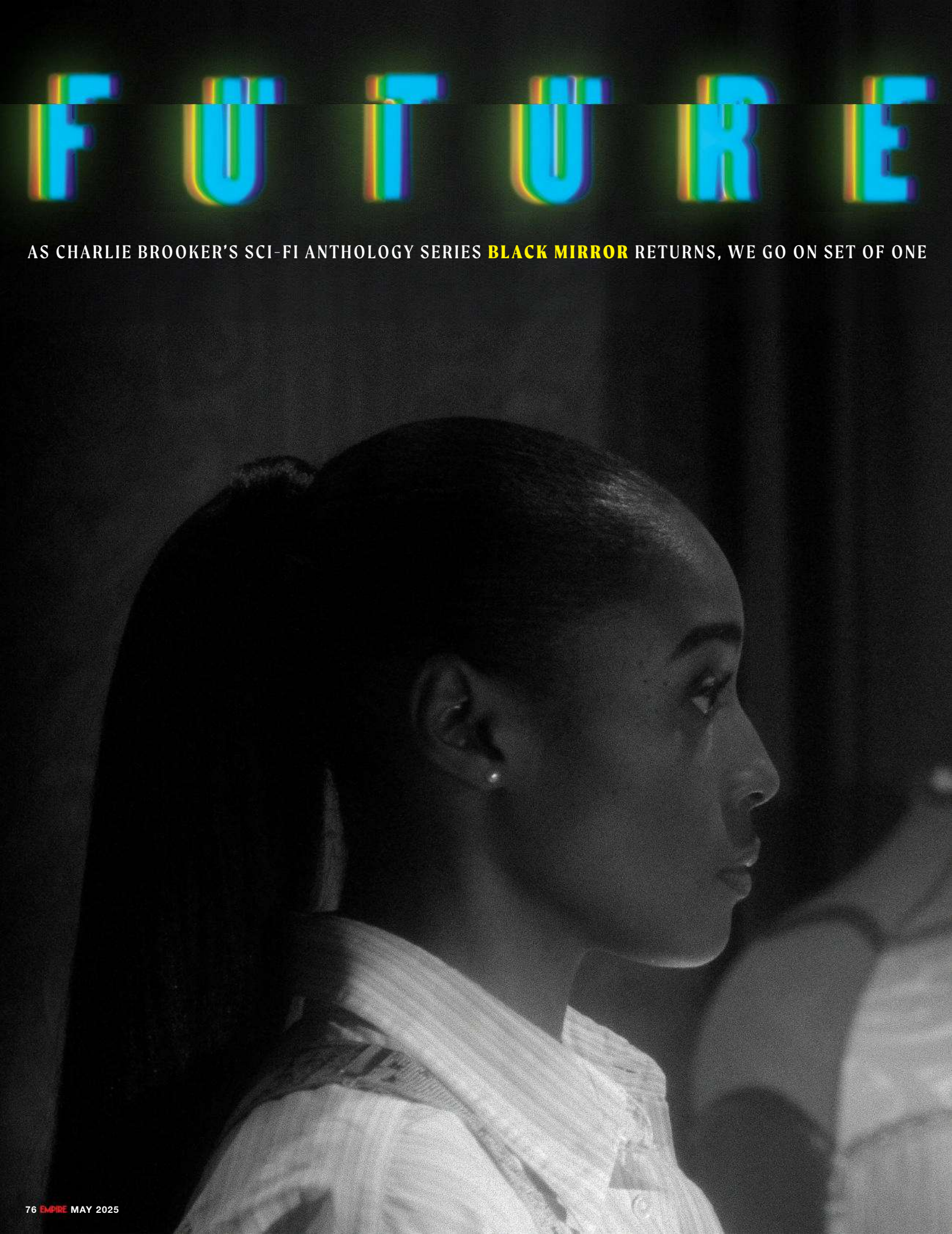
Previous page: Pony hair moto jacket: House Of Gray. This page: Leather jacket: ISAIA. Additional images: Disney/Marvel, Imago, Netflix

Styling: Michael Fusco at Exclusive Artists. Grooming: Michael Dueñas at TMG using Dior.

"**MY WORK IS MY LIFE**. IT'S NOT JUST SOMETHING THAT I DO. IT'S AFFECTED BY **THE IMPRINT** OF MY LIFE."

FUTURE

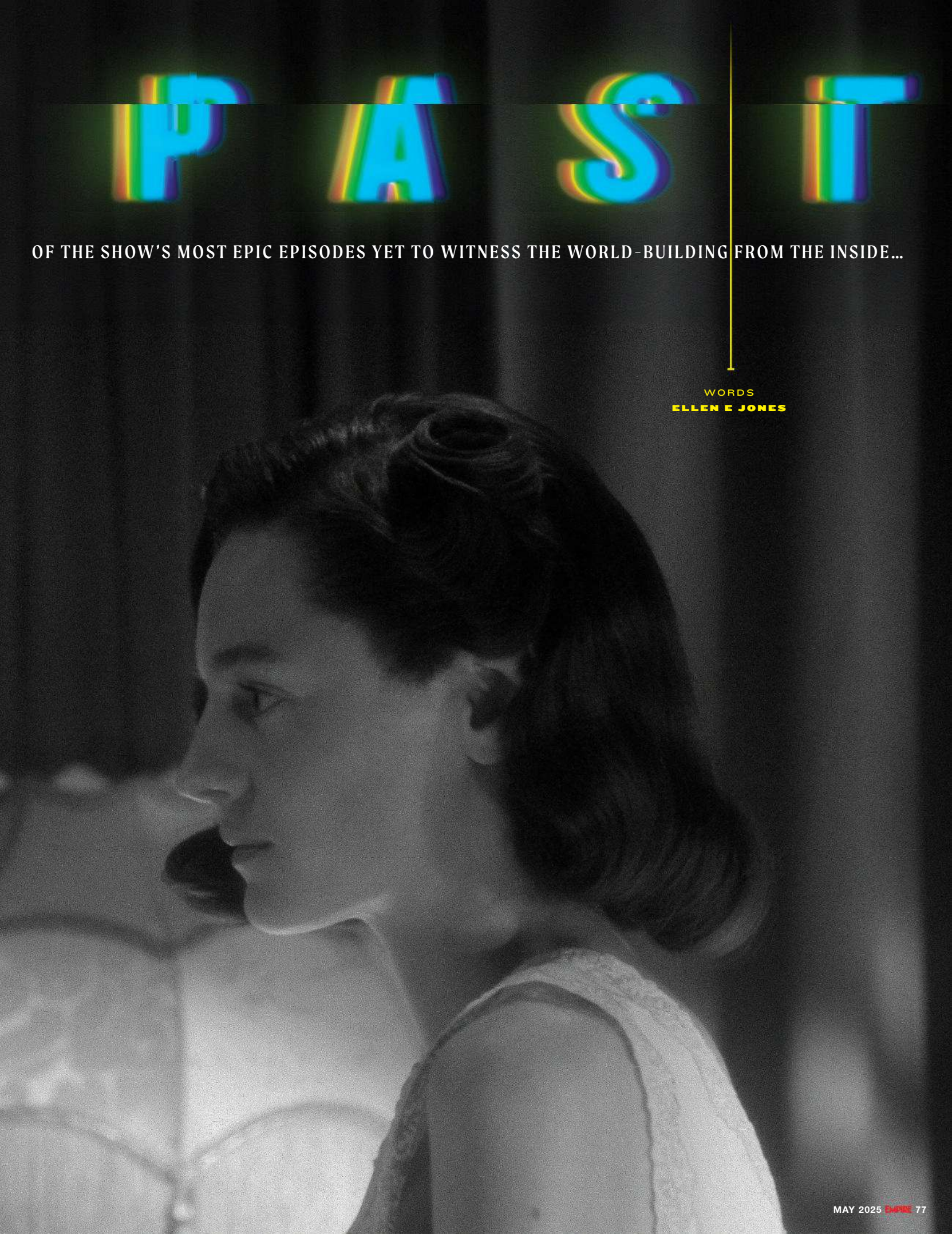
AS CHARLIE BROOKER'S SCI-FI ANTHOLOGY SERIES **BLACK MIRROR** RETURNS, WE GO ON SET OF ONE



PAST

OF THE SHOW'S MOST EPIC EPISODES YET TO WITNESS THE WORLD-BUILDING FROM THE INSIDE...

WORDS
ELLEN E JONES



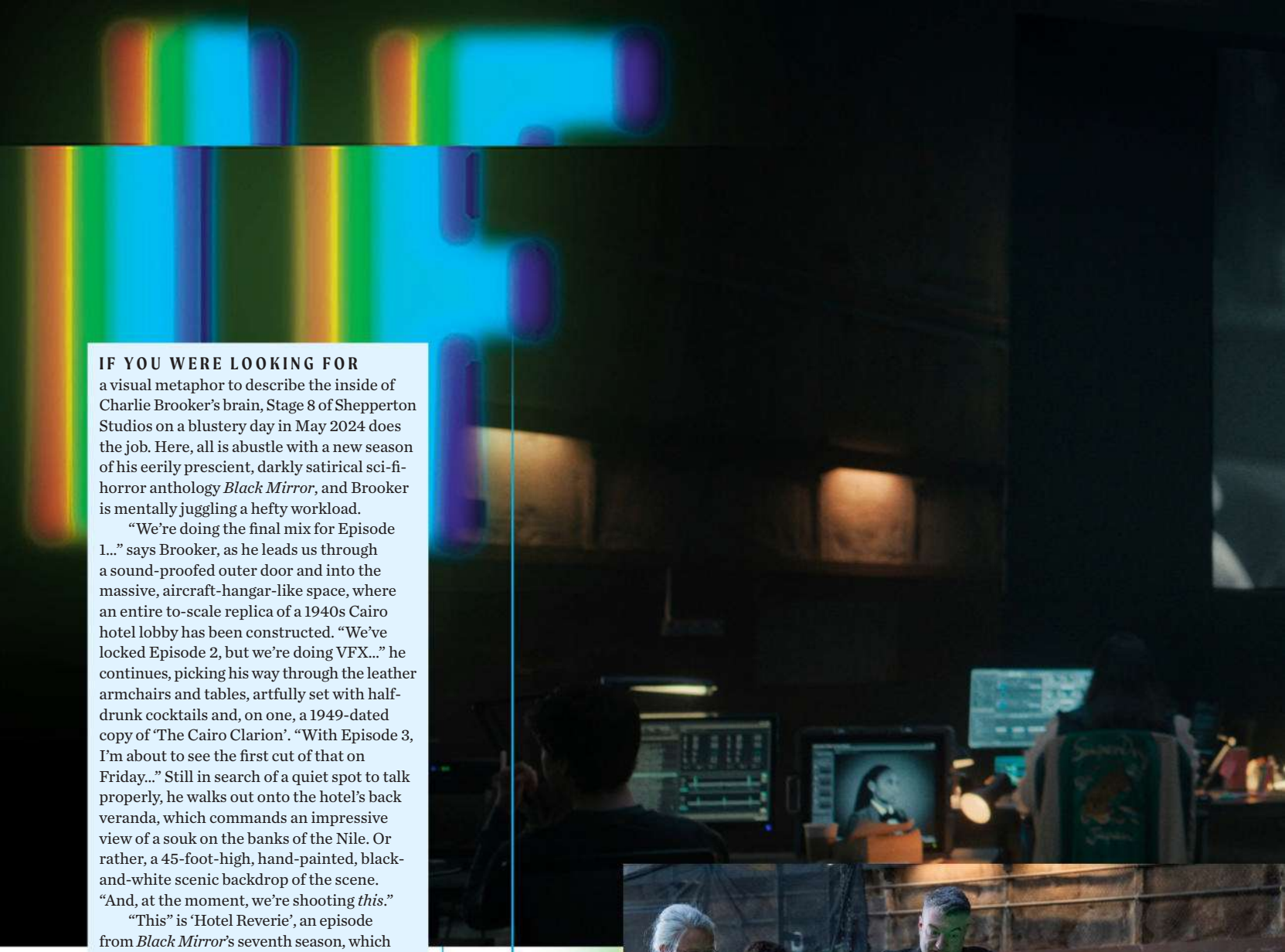
IF YOU WERE LOOKING FOR a visual metaphor to describe the inside of Charlie Brooker's brain, Stage 8 of Shepperton Studios on a blustery day in May 2024 does the job. Here, all is abustle with a new season of his eerily prescient, darkly satirical sci-fi-horror anthology *Black Mirror*, and Brooker is mentally juggling a hefty workload.

"We're doing the final mix for Episode 1..." says Brooker, as he leads us through a sound-proofed outer door and into the massive, aircraft-hangar-like space, where an entire to-scale replica of a 1940s Cairo hotel lobby has been constructed. "We've locked Episode 2, but we're doing VFX..." he continues, picking his way through the leather armchairs and tables, artfully set with half-drunk cocktails and, on one, a 1949-dated copy of 'The Cairo Clarion'. "With Episode 3, I'm about to see the first cut of that on Friday..." Still in search of a quiet spot to talk properly, he walks out onto the hotel's back veranda, which commands an impressive view of a souk on the banks of the Nile. Or rather, a 45-foot-high, hand-painted, black-and-white scenic backdrop of the scene. "And, at the moment, we're shooting *this*."

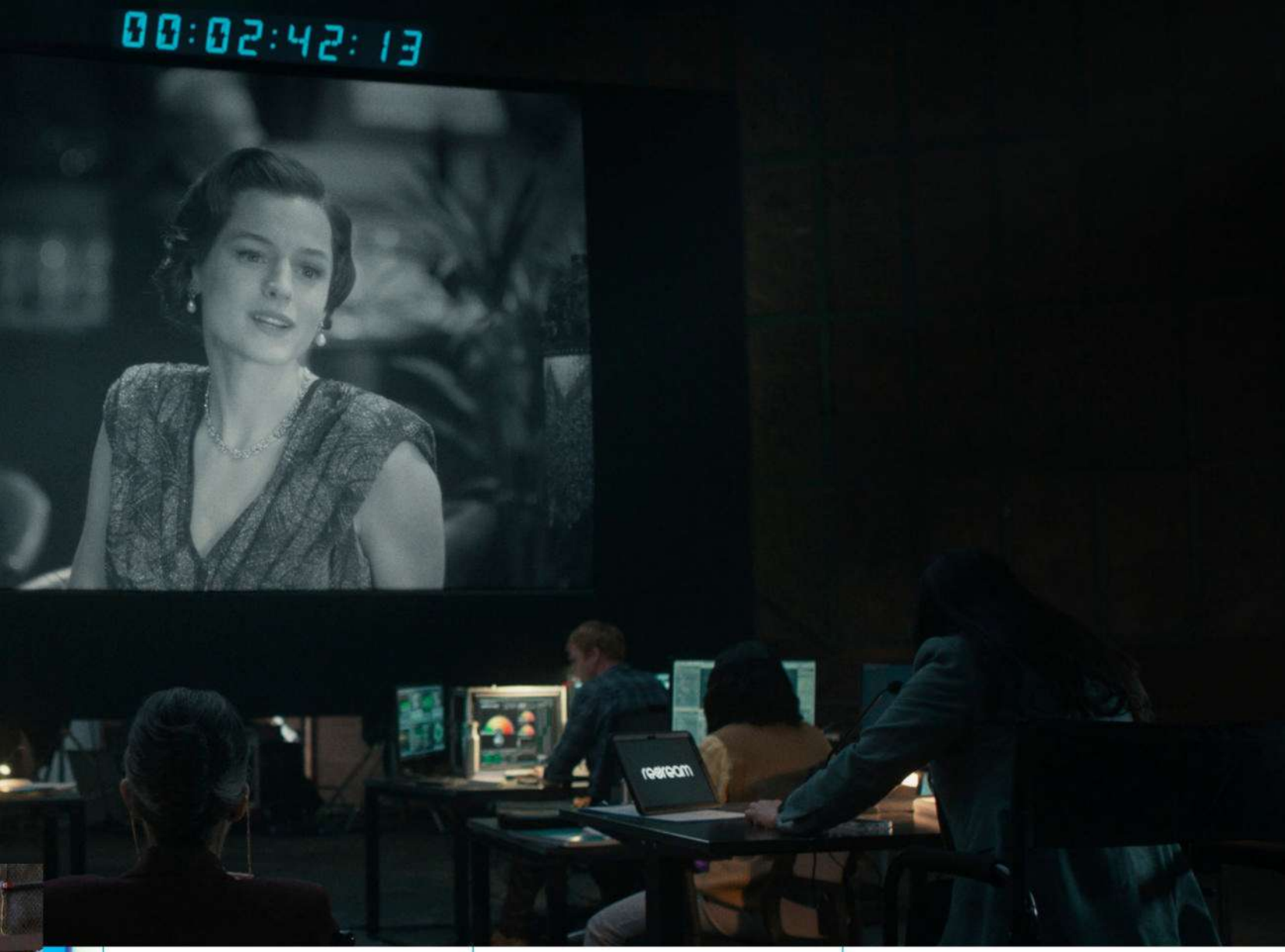
"This" is 'Hotel Reverie', an episode from *Black Mirror*'s seventh season, which invokes the sweeping romances of 1940s cinema, from *Brief Encounter* to *Casablanca* — albeit with a very *Black Mirror* twist. To add to the general air of busyness, the production of 'Hotel Reverie' has overlapped with another episode, a sequel to Season 4's multiple-Emmy-winning space epic 'USS Callister', and elsewhere on the Shepperton backlot, Ridley Scott's second unit is shooting pick-ups for *Gladiator II*.

All in all, it seems Brooker may have died and gone to a self-imagined heaven. "It's kind of what you thought a movie studio was like when you're a kid," he says, as a dapper chap in a Bogart-worthy tux saunters past. "Like that sort of *Blazing Saddles* thing, with somebody in a space suit talking to a Roman centurion." Eventually he finds us a place to sit, by an ornamental pond — the very same spot in which Issa Rae and Emma Corrin will, in a few hours' time, be shooting a moonlit tête-à-tête scene. Brooker collapses into a high-backed rattan chair. "And then I'm about to start writing the final episode. I don't even know the character names yet, so that's slightly terrifying." He inhales sharply.

'Hotel Reverie' is, in many ways, an emblematic *Black Mirror* episode, and being on set illuminates how the whole series is



Above: Emma Corrin rocking the 1940s screen starlet look as actor Dorothy Chambers in 'Hotel Reverie'. **Right, top to bottom:** *Black Mirror* creator Charlie Brooker on set; Issa Rae as Brandy Friday.



put together. But right now, for Brooker, "This is the point where everything's happening at once."

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SHEPPERTON STUDIOS HAS BEEN popping off pretty consistently since it first opened in 1932, in the grounds of a 17th-century Surrey manor house. This is where, in 1949, Carol Reed shot scenes for *The Third Man*, under studio head Sir Alexander Korda. It's where, in 1963, Stanley Kubrick convened a war room for *Dr. Strangelove*; and where, in 1980, a heavily made-up John Hurt received visitors from Victorian high society, in David Lynch's *The Elephant Man*.

This is the sort of illustrious heritage which also belongs to Keyworth, the fictional British film studio which produced the (also fictional) original 1940s romance 'Hotel Reverie' — as evidenced by the office walls of head honcho Judith Keyworth (played with appropriate hauteur by Dame Harriet Walter). Look closely and you may spot a mocked-up poster for a film called 'Fab Fangs', "some sort of Swinging Sixties vampire movie", according to Brooker, and another for a 1970s *Carry On*-looking romp called 'Buck Up, Doctor'.

However, while Shepperton secured another decade of prosperity in 2019 when Netflix opened its production hub, *Black Mirror*'s Keyworth is struggling to keep up with a changing industry. Enter Kimmy, a young, American exec played by Awkwafina, who offers to revive the studio's ailing fortunes by inserting a contemporary A-lister — later revealed to be Brandy Friday (Issa Rae) — into one of their classic titles. Using Kimmy's 'Redream' technology, Brandy will be inserted into the simulated world of 'Hotel Reverie', to take the place of the original white male lead, while Dorothy Chambers (Emma Corrin), starring as "tragic heiress" Clara Ryce-Lechere, and all the other actors will be AI simulations, for whom the 'reality' of Hotel Reverie is the only reality there is.

Brooker had originally considered making the rejigged classic something James Bond-esque, but landed on 1940s romance after watching David Lean's 1945, black-and-white, romantic drama *Brief Encounter* for the first time. "It's actually quite mundane, isn't it, *Brief Encounter*," he says. "It's all about smouldering over jam sandwiches in a railway café. But I think there's something about the contrast between the uptight Britishness of the past [and present-day Hollywood]. And Emma is amazing. You absolutely believe that they're from that era."

This is very true.'Hotel Reverie' director Haolu Wang is shooting a short scene in which someone sits down at the hotel's baby grand piano to play for Dorothy's Clara. When crew members on set gather round to view the playback monitors — a look of hurt confusion emerging on Clara's face, as these strains of Debussy evoke long-buried memories — it would be easy to believe we were watching a Blu-ray reissue of some lost wartime gem and not, in fact, the near-live-feed of a scene performed and shot just a few feet away, by the very much 21st-century star Emma Corrin. What is it that creates this uncanny effect? The accuracy of the period costumes? The detail of the set-dressing? The angle of the lighting?

Jessica Rhoades, *Black Mirror*'s exec producer and Brooker's frequent sounding-board, has another thought. "Their bone structure's incredible," she says, referring to Corrin's face, which does indeed share the ›

elfin charm of 1940s British starlets like Vivien Leigh and Celia Johnson. "They have a shaved head, and when they showed up and popped the wig on, they just completely transformed."

Later, when *Empire* gets the chance to ask Corrin about this directly, they credit their work with Polly Bennett, the choreographer-turned-movement-coach who previously helped them nail Princess Diana's iconic fringe-peep for *The Crown*. "I was trying to get the very specific sort of rigidity that these [1940s] actresses had," says Corrin, who, at Brooker's suggestion, also studied Old Hollywood blooper compilations on YouTube. "Particularly the way they manoeuvred themselves around objects in the room. I remember Polly saying, 'Imagine you have a really long cape on everywhere you go.' It completely changes the way you hold yourself."

Brooker's period-specific dialogue also helps. Clara talks about feeling "ever so melancholy" or, alternately, being transported by music "to the gayest of places". *Black Mirror*'s anthology format has allowed him to "scratch different genre itches" over the years, including an attempt at a Western which was then aborted (because "I thought *Westworld* already exists"), and even an as-yet-unproduced *Black Mirror* musical. Yet, perhaps surprisingly for such a forward-looking show, period drama has become Brooker's most regular refrain. Every decade since the 1960s has featured in *Black Mirror*, plus, "We visit the '90s a couple of times this season, while coming... back to the future. I think that's partly a consequence of me getting older and remembering more of *time*." Brooker pronounces this last word with the sonorous resonance of Father Time himself. "Also I became aware of a lot of sci-fi shows starting to look like everyone's surrounded by chrome and glass, while frowning at iPhones. So it's an effort to make this feel different."

The period setting has also allowed Issa Rae to experience a rather *less* immersive version of the opportunity presented to her character. As a *Black Mirror* fan, she loved that the script appeared to be "a blend of a bunch of my favourites, like [Emmy-winning Season 3 romance] 'San Junipero' and [Anthony Mackie-starring, VR infidelity thriller] 'Striking Vipers'" — but did she also relate to her character's feeling of being creatively limited by the industry? "*Beyond*. It's the reason I started writing my own work, because you're pigeonholed. And of course, being a Black woman, there's already so few roles available to begin with."

So the idea of playing a role which would ordinarily be closed off to her for reasons of race, class and gender — not to mention the relentless passage of time — definitely appealed. Being in 'Hotel Reverie' "made me nostalgic for a past that wasn't mine," while also addressing her concerns about the future of film and television. "It just felt extremely... likely," she says. "Which is the most terrifying thing about watching *Black Mirror*. I could completely see this happening. Especially in an industry that feels so starved for creativity sometimes."

Above: Awkwafina joins the cast as studio exec Kimmy. **Right:** Dorothy cuts a tragic figure.

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SCATHING MEDIA SATIRE IS a long-running strand of *Black Mirror*. Latterly, though, this seems to have become more pointed still, with the introduction of Streamberry, an in-universe streaming platform with notable similarities to *Black Mirror*'s own corporate daddy, Netflix. It's one example of those little hidden in-jokes and recurring references that Brooker — forever a gamer at heart — likes to provide as a treat for observant viewers. *Black Mirror* has always rewarded those who pay attention, and this time, the Easter eggs will include the literal, edible kind, made as set-dressing for an episode set in a Cadbury's-style confectioners, themed in reference to the (particularly grim) Season 2 episode 'White Bear' and from a recipe devised by Brooker himself. "Dark chocolate with a miso-cream filling," explains West London's Willy Wonka. "And it's actually tasty! So there's a merchandising opportunity there, if nothing else."

As for an over-arching Season 7 theme, Brooker can't think of one that day on set, but by the time we catch up on a video call eight months later, alongside Jessica Rhoades, he's had time to reflect. He now sees *Black Mirror* 7 as a return to sci-fi dystopian basics, after Season 6's 'Red Mirror'-labelled horror detour. "They're all sort of 'OG' *Black Mirror*, I think, in that they revolve

Below, top to bottom: Brandy and Dorothy; Kimmy with studio head Judith Keyworth (Harriet Walter); A-lister Brandy takes centre stage.

around some technical doodad that could potentially fuck people over. So, y'know, the nubbin (*tech device*) going on the side of the temple? That happens quite a lot this season."

Rhoades' face lights up at this. "I think it's every actor's secret dream, when they come onto a *Black Mirror* set. They're like 'Give me the nubbin! I want the nubbin!'" Has this much-coveted piece of plastic become like the *Blue Peter* badge of *Black Mirror*? "We do have a box of them that we could hand out," muses Brooker. "And my wife [ex-*Blue Peter* presenter Konnie Huq] does have a box of *Blue Peter* badges at home; I could swap with her!"

While 'Hotel Reverie' does deploy the latest in cutting-edge 'nubbin' technology, it's evident from the moment you step on set that this episode is as much a celebration of the old ways. The Old Hollywood ways, to be specific. "I just loved that everyone was doing such incredible research into black-and-white," says Rhoades. "And it's popped up in all these unexpected ways."

For instance, to step onto the hotel lobby set is to step into a pretty close replica of Shepheard's Hotel, *the* place to be seen for Egypt's fashionable set of ex-pat Parisians and wealthy locals, until it burned down in the great Cairo Fire of 1952. Production designer Helen Scott used black-and-white photographs of the interiors as a reference, even down to the colour palette. "We used four depths of grey [to paint the sets] and I think it's worked," she says. "We could have taken out the colour [in post]. You see that a lot in television, but to my eye, it's too interesting. I wanted to make it much more boring and flatter, because then the interest is the actors."

Costume designer Verity Hawkes had to be similarly considered in her choices: "I love things to tonally match, which is fine in colour, but when you're doing it in black and white, if you don't have a big contrast it becomes a bit muddy. Black just sucks the light too much." So instead of going trad with the evening wear, she outfitted the background actors in bright pink, red and purple tuxedos, sourced from the costumiers' Light Entertainment section — the kind of look that might more usually be seen on a cruise-ship bingo-caller. "They're cut the same, but on camera they read as mid-grey."

An awareness of this kind of screen-craft sorcery, and the suspension of disbelief it both requires and enables, is also embedded deep in the episode's source code, says Brooker. "The tone of vintage movies is more artificial than contemporary ones. I mean, it's not mumblecore, is it? But it's interesting how in your brain, you go, 'Okay, painted backdrop? Fine. Back projection, out the back of a car? Fine.' You just go with it."

Black Mirror has always used tech to explore the nature of human consciousness, but here, while the AI simulation provides the plot, the screen-storytelling itself — basic cinema magic which has been around since the medium's earliest days — enables deeper thematic exploration. It's this which makes 'Hotel Reverie' perhaps the darkest and most reflective of all *Black Mirror*s. There is a point in every episode that goes beyond 'plot-twist' — call it 'the existential shiver moment' — and the version in 'Hotel Reverie' is particularly brain-melting.

And yet, among all the darkness... there is light.

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SOME THINGS HAVE STAYED THE same in the 14 years since *Black Mirror* Episode 1, 'The National Anthem', aired on Channel 4. Others have changed. To misquote Martin Luther King, Jr (a *Star Trek* fan, who would probably have loved 'USS Callister'), the arc of the *Black Mirror* universe is long, but it bends towards justice. As the series progresses, Brooker's once rare tender moods seem to be becoming more frequent, and 'Hotel Reverie' is up there with 'San Junipero' or 'Hang The DJ' when it comes to hitting us in the feels. The tech used, Brooker admits, is also "quite a charming, utopian version of an AI scraping lots of information from the past and regurgitating it." Is that representative of all six new episodes? "It's not *all* utopian this season, but there's quite a lot of emotion overall."

So maybe this isn't the most swoonsome show on television, but when Brooker does do romance, he goes all out: *Black Mirror* love is a kind that transcends not only our physical, gendered forms, but persists across realities and dimensions. "It's very much soul-to-soul" says Corrin approvingly. "And I really love connection like that, because I think it speaks to something fundamental about who we are, and [how] we might not know until a certain person awakes something in us."

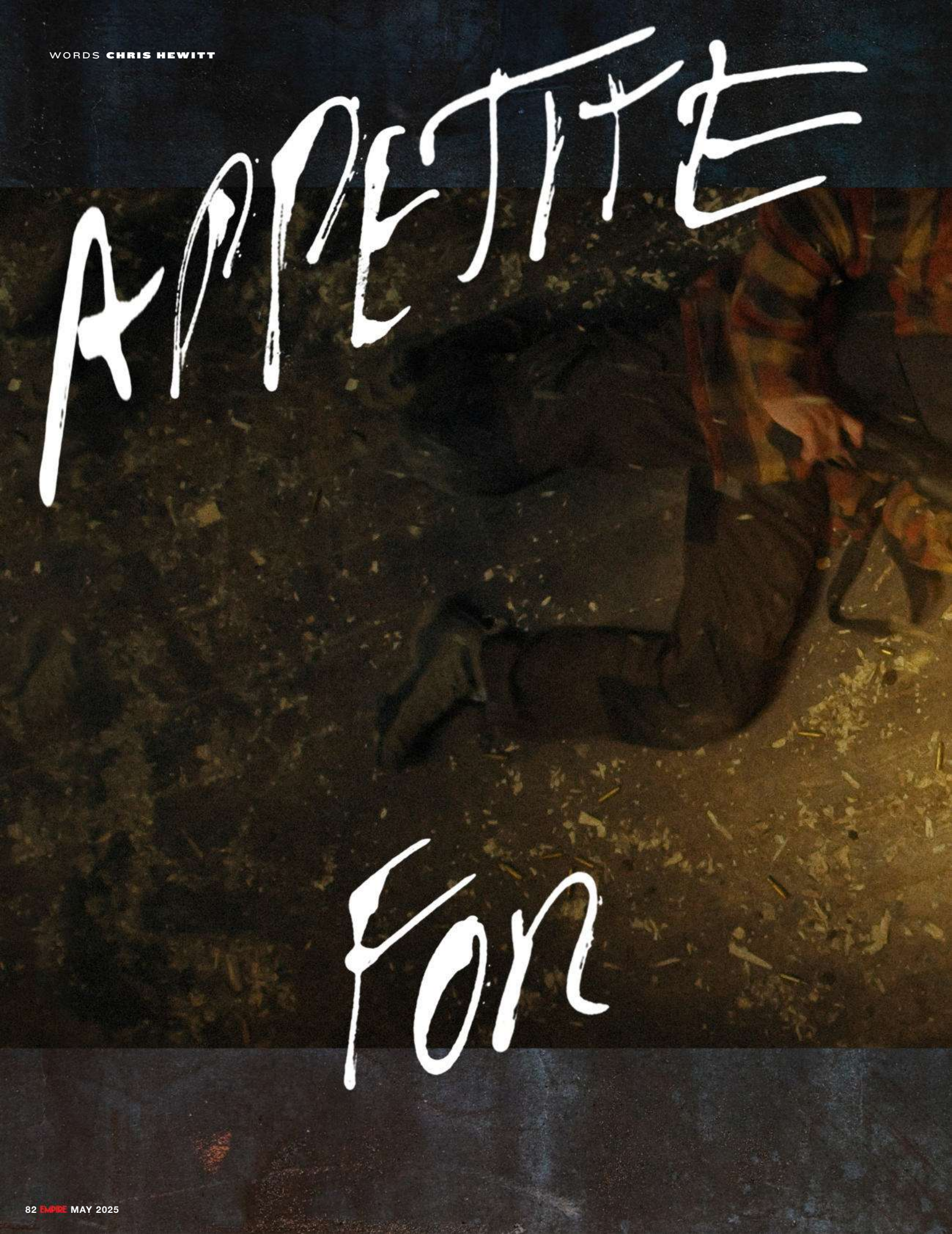
We are, in short, accusing the man who introduced prime-ministerial pig-pounding into the mainstream political discourse of being an old softie at heart. How does he plead? "Well, it's partly that the world keeps getting more and more horrible, and so the show gets more and more escapist in response," says Brooker, by way of mitigating circumstance. "Who would want to just watch nothing but dystopia now, when you can look at it out your window?" It seems we are in for the most optimistic season yet, then? "Oh no, I'm definitely still a catastrophist. And it wouldn't be *Black Mirror* if there weren't moments where you go, 'Oh my fucking God! This is *horrible*!'"

So yes, *Black Mirror* is still horrible, but — for now, at least — in the gayest, most sweetly melancholy way possible.

BLACK MIRROR **SEASON 7 IS COMING SOON TO NETFLIX**

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

APPETITE FOR



YEARS IN THE MAKING, GARETH EVANS' **HAVOC** IS FINALLY UPON US — AND IT'S TAKING NO PRISONERS. HERE, THE DIRECTOR TELLS US HOW HE PUT TOGETHER A BRUISING, BLOODY BONANZA

DESTRUCTOR

Don't call it a comeback.

Gareth Evans prefers another term. "It's been quite the hiatus for me," he tells *Empire*.

He's not kidding. Since the Welsh director stabbed the last 'i' and shot the last 't' in the face on 2014's *The Raid 2*, the man who has a genuine claim on the title of the world's greatest contemporary action director hasn't directed much action. "My action output since then has only really been the first season of *Gangs Of London* [in 2020]," he says. "And that was on TV. This is the first time I'll have done a film with action at its core for a long time."

He's referring to *HAVOC*, the movie that teams him up with Tom Hardy for a bloody, balls-to-the-wall exercise in, well, havoc, that could well fully justify its all-caps title. After a decade away from making movie mayhem, Evans is back in business, and so we asked the master of action to give us an action masterclass. Here's his guide to wreaking *HAVOC*.

DEVISE A PLAN

For Evans, every film he makes starts with an idea for a story, rather than a cool kill or bone-break. Since *The Raid* and *The Raid 2* — the pair of no-holds-barred, relentless belters that he made after moving to Indonesia — put him on the map, Evans has had his fair share of big-budget propositions. He turned them all down. "I got offered a few things, and I'd read a few scripts that weren't self-generated projects," he tells *Empire* over a lengthy Zoom from his home in Wales. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't tempted by a few, but nothing was enough to drag me away from the things that would speak to me. As soon as I lock in on a film I want to do, I can't divert my brain into something else."

That had been the case with 'Blister', which he came close to shooting soon after *The Raid 2*. Locations had been scouted. Action sequences had been designed. And yet. "After developing it for a while, there was a fork in the road," he says, face etched with regret. "That one fell by the wayside." And it was certainly the case with *Apostle*, the incredibly bleak folk-horror film which hit Netflix in 2018, and which was as far removed from action as he could get. But it was after that movie that the desire to return to action took hold. A concept popped into his head, which he shared at a breakfast at SXSW in Austin, Texas, with then-Netflix executive Matt Levin. "I remember saying, 'Oh, I've got this film idea,'" recalls Evans. "'It's a 95-minute action thriller set over the course of one or two nights.'"

That's all he had, other than a vague idea that "it starts with this cop in a crime scene, with all these dead bodies around, and it's a drug deal gone bad". Levin liked it, and as Evans worked on the first season of *Gangs Of London*, he continued to develop the idea. Soon, he knew who the cop was — Walker. He knew the identities of the dead bodies, and how they got there. He knew the intricacies of the drug deal gone bad, the various criminal factions involved, how it would involve a pair of star-crossed lovers, Charlie and Mia (Justin Cornwell and Quelin Sepulveda), and how it would lead the former's father (Forest Whitaker), the mayor of an unnamed American city, to task Walker with making sure his son stays alive in the aftermath of the chaos.

"It was only ever going to be *HAVOC* next," admits Evans. "It was gonna be nothing else. That's always been my approach." And while the idea has grown in scale and scope since then, he's remained true to that original vision. Just get a load of *HAVOC*'s runtime. "The last frame, before it cuts to credits, is 96 minutes," laughs Evans. "Job done."

PREPARE FOR ACTION

Evans' approach to shooting and editing action hasn't changed much over the years. He still likes to mount his version of pre-viz, by building cardboard sets at a pre-production base in Cardiff and staging the action sequences with his

Clockwise from top left: The Assassin (Michelle Waterson): not to be messed with; Detective Walker (Tom Hardy) is having a blast; Cop Ellie (Jessie Mei Li); Mayor Lawrence Beaumont (Forest Whitaker) goes public; Walker makes an entrance; A Triad gets interrogated.

fight coordinator, Jude Poyer, and his team. All the better to get a feel for the intense interplay his action sequences demand, and to figure out camera angles, cuts, pacing, and stunts.

That was very much the case for *HAVOC*. "We came to it from having designed an entire series of action scenes for *Gangs*, so we used that same approach," he says. But he knew right from the start what the film *wasn't* going to be. "It was never going to be a martial-arts film. I wanted this to feel like the gunplay stuff that I love watching."

Much has changed about the action-movie landscape since *The Raid 2*; 2014 was the year that *John Wick* came out, and that franchise's influence on the modern American action movie, in particular, has been huge. Evans, a movie fanatic, is not unaware ("I try to keep abreast of everything, and see what people are doing"), but his influences are more classical. He's a die-hard fan of 'heroic bloodshed', the sub-genre of Hong Kong action cinema in which flawed heroes lay it all on the line. "It's never been about trying to follow whatever's popular," he says. "When I watch the stuff I've done, I'm seeing a Sammo Hung-Jackie Chan beat, a Sam Peckinpah edit, a John Woo-style moment. That's where I'm feeding off."

HAVOC has a number of gung-ho set-pieces, all of which had their humble beginnings in cardboard city. "There's a sequence in a fishing shack where it's like an onslaught, a relentless attack," says Evans. "Every corner of this place someone's going to pop up with a gun, someone's going to pop up with a knife, and they're going to come from under the floorboards, around the corners, through this window, through that window."

Doing all that in a large room with nothing more than fake guns, knives, willing stuntmen and a shitload of boxes takes incredible planning, but it takes the pain out of having to choreograph complicated gunplay on set. It also means that Evans and his team will know the basic dimensions of their sets before they build them. And it can also influence the finished product. "I would tell Jude, 'This has got to almost be like a zombie attack', but the zombies can run, and they've got guns," laughs Evans. "And we would then come up with these cool beats and moments within the choreography itself, where we could find different ways to use these weapons, and find different props that might exist in a fishing shack. What stuff is at hand? What weapons can we believe would be at hand? How can we use them in a way that then becomes memorable and different and unique? Whether it's a gun or a hook or a harpoon, how can we put that to use in a way that will make people never forget that sequence?"

Of course, one way to do that is to have an A-lister doing the wielding. ›

FIND THE MUSCLE

For his run of films in Indonesia, including 2009's comparatively little-seen *Merantau Warrior*, Evans had the services of some of that country's finest martial artists, including Yayan Ruhian, Cecep Arif Rahman, Joe Taslim and, of course, Iko Uwais, the former phone salesman whom Evans discovered and nurtured into his leading man/muse/one-man army. With *HAVOC*, Evans knew that he wouldn't have any of his old guard to call upon. But he would have Tom Hardy.

The role of Walker wasn't written with Hardy in mind, but when the actor expressed an interest in taking the role, Evans wasn't about to complain. "Our paths have almost crossed a few times," he says. "We were going to go for him for 'Blister' at one point, but we didn't get there. And there was an early conversation about *Apostle*, but that didn't happen."

Third time's the charm. "We sent him the script, and he really dug it and related to it. We jumped on a call, which was the start of maybe five or six phone-calls that were picking away at the character, the history of the character, where he's from, his behaviour, his demons. They'd be three or four hours long. And Tom's really funny, so he would improvise lines and bring a load of dry wit and humour to the character."

As an action hero, though, Hardy presented something of a different prospect for Evans, who often tailored sequences for the lithe limbs of Uwais, and was able to work on fight sequences with his principal cast for days on end, meticulously matching each of his pre-viz shots in live-action and dropping them into the edit as he went. Hardy hadn't signed on when Evans, Poyer and the film's DP, Matt Flannery, were mounting their boxy blitzkrieg. But when he did, swayed in part by the pre-viz footage Evans was able to show him, it meant accommodating the actor's bruising and brutal physicality.

"That's why we kept it away from that martial-arts aspect," says Evans, even though Hardy is proficient in jiu-jitsu, and Walker is not afraid of using his fists. "But Tom came to us in fucking beast mode. I tapped him on the shoulder and it was just like granite. He came fully physically prepared. And I don't want him to look bad on screen, doing something that's not comfortable. I want him to look fucking amazing. So we could adapt certain beats here and there. But Walker is not silky-smooth. He's gonna cause as much carnage and as much mayhem as possible. He's not grabbing your wrist and turning you into an arm lock. He's grabbing you by the scruff of the neck and driving your face into the nearest heavy object." Hardy by name, hardier by nature.

Top to bottom: Action!; Writer-director Gareth Evans on set; Yeo Yann Yann — as Tsui's mother — lets her gun do the talking; Charlie (Justin Cornwell) is all about the fire power.

PULL NO PUNCHES

HAVOC is the biggest thing Evans has made yet. It'll make *The Raid 2* look like *The Raid*. It'll make the farmhouse siege in the first season of *Gangs Of London* look like an episode of *Emmerdale*. That sense of scale, of epic scope, is something that wasn't initially on his to-do list for the film, but it's something he's embraced. "*HAVOC* mushroomed as I was writing it," he admits. "The scale of something, for me, gets dictated by the story being told. And so, with the nightclub sequence, it needed to feel like this relentless, moving thing that spills out onto the streets."

Evans is referring to the most ambitious sequence of his career to date: a showdown in a fictional nightclub called The Medusa, which sees Walker and various factions of cops, corrupt cops (led by Timothy Olyphant) and stone-cold killers converge upon each other. And when they come face-to-face-to-face-to-face, an orgy ensues. Of the violent kind, you filthy lot. "I wanted that sense of scale," continues Evans. "Because it's about a cop who's hiding out in the city two nights before Christmas, everything needs to be clandestine, needs to be incognito. But the scale of the shit sandwich he's about to have to eat had to get so out of control and so big that you couldn't hide anymore."

Hiding was not on the agenda when Evans, Hardy and co dived into that sequence in the first week of filming in Wales, back in 2021. "We were just coming out of the back end of Covid," recalls Evans. "So we were all Covid-testing, we all had masks on, and we had 250 extras split into their own little zones. Meanwhile, you're trying to make your shot count every day while doing this sequence of people using iron bars and knives and glass bottles. But I was so, so happy. We walked into this amazing nightclub that took up the entire soundstage, and it just looked phenomenal. You could feel like, 'Okay, this is bigger than anything I've done before. This is a lot to orchestrate.'"

NAVIGATE OBSTACLES

Your eyes did not deceive you. We did write "2021". That is when principal photography took place for *HAVOC*, finishing on 22 October, with *Empire* rocking up to the Cardiff soundstage to watch a sequence involving Olyphant, a cop car, and a washing machine full of cocaine.

The plan was to release the movie on Netflix the following year, but that was contingent on scheduling some additional photography. Nothing major, Evans says. Just a couple of blanks that needed to be filled in. "There were a few things that we wanted to tweak, and it required a little bit of additional photography. But we found ourselves in a position where it was impossible to find one week, or two weeks, where everybody would be available. And that became a little bit of a saga in itself."

So much so that it wasn't just a case of weeks passing, but years, as the SAG-AFTRA and Writers Guild strikes also affected things.

ACTION REPLAY

REVISITING GAREth EVANS' MOST SHIT-KICKING SET-PIECES

ROOF PURSUIT (*MERANTAU WARRIOR*)

Evans' little-seen first pairing with Iko Uwais, Indonesia's *Merantau Warrior*, has enough dust-ups to fill a dozen action movies. The incredible chase scene that sees Uwais' Yuda run across roofs, down rickety bamboo scaffolding, and through an alleyway while beating the shit out of allcomers, is the pick of the bunch.

DOG FIGHT (*THE RAID*)

Almost every sequence in *The Raid* is a ten on *Empire*'s patented 'oofometer', as all kinds of pain is dished out, but the emotional kicker comes after a staggering fight between Joe Taslim's stoic Sgt Jaka and Yayan Ruhian's psychotic Mad Dog, that ends with one of the film's true heroes going out in heartbreaking fashion.

FORKING HELL (*THE RAID 2*)

The final 45 minutes of the more expansive *Raid* sequel is wall-to-wall mayhem. The standout is a meticulously crafted and choreographed kitchen showdown between Uwais' Rama and Cecep Arif Rahman's the Assassin that is a brutal, bloody starter, main course and dessert all in one. At times they move so fast, the eye can barely follow.

FARMAGEDDON (*GANGS OF LONDON*)

The *pièce de résistance* of the TV thriller series comes in Episode 5, which focuses on a small group as they try desperately to stave off an assault from highly trained assassins while holing up in a Welsh farmhouse. A bleaker version of *Home Alone*, its vicious brilliance is a reminder of what Evans is capable of.

Havoc had been wrought on *HAVOC*. Eventually, in the spring of last year, the stars aligned. Hardy, Evans and cast and crew returned to set. Thankfully, nobody had died in the interim. "I was worried about Tom doing lots of jiu-jitsu fights!" laughs Evans. "But everyone looked largely the same. And it just plays all the better for it."

Interestingly, very little was required in terms of picking up action beats, or shooting new shootouts. That was pretty much all wrapped up first time around, with an enthusiastic Evans having sat *Empire* down on set and shown us us the fishing-shack sequence and Medusa set-piece edited together (both of which easily stand shoulder-to-bruised-shoulder with the best of Evans' output to date). The additional photography, he says, was chiefly "stunt work, because I didn't feel like we had honoured Ellie (*a cop, played by Jessie Mei Li, who teams up with Walker*) in terms of the way we'd introduced her. So we had a stunt guy do a nice, chunky stair-fall for us."

When the movie finally hits Netflix next month, it'll mark the end of an odyssey that Evans didn't know was going to be an odyssey when he began it (in fairness, Odysseus didn't have a clue either). But it'll be the culmination of everything he has learned about action, everything he understands about action, and everything he wants an action movie to do. To wit: "I hope people will wince and cheer in equal measure." For any action director, those are words to shoot by.

***HAVOC* IS ON NETFLIX FROM 25 APRIL**

the EMPIRE Deep Dive

IN OUR REGULAR SERIES, WE EXPLORE A SLICE OF CINEMA LORE

THIS MONTH

VAMPIRA

WORDS **TOM ELLEN**

THE RED DRESS

AT FIRST, THERE'S nothing — only smoke.

Gradually, though, the fog dissipates and we can make out a dingy hallway, full of cobwebs and candelabras. There's music, too: a fairground organ wheezing dementedly beneath a piano — one key tap-tap-tapping like a leaking pipe. And then, out of the darkness, she appears.

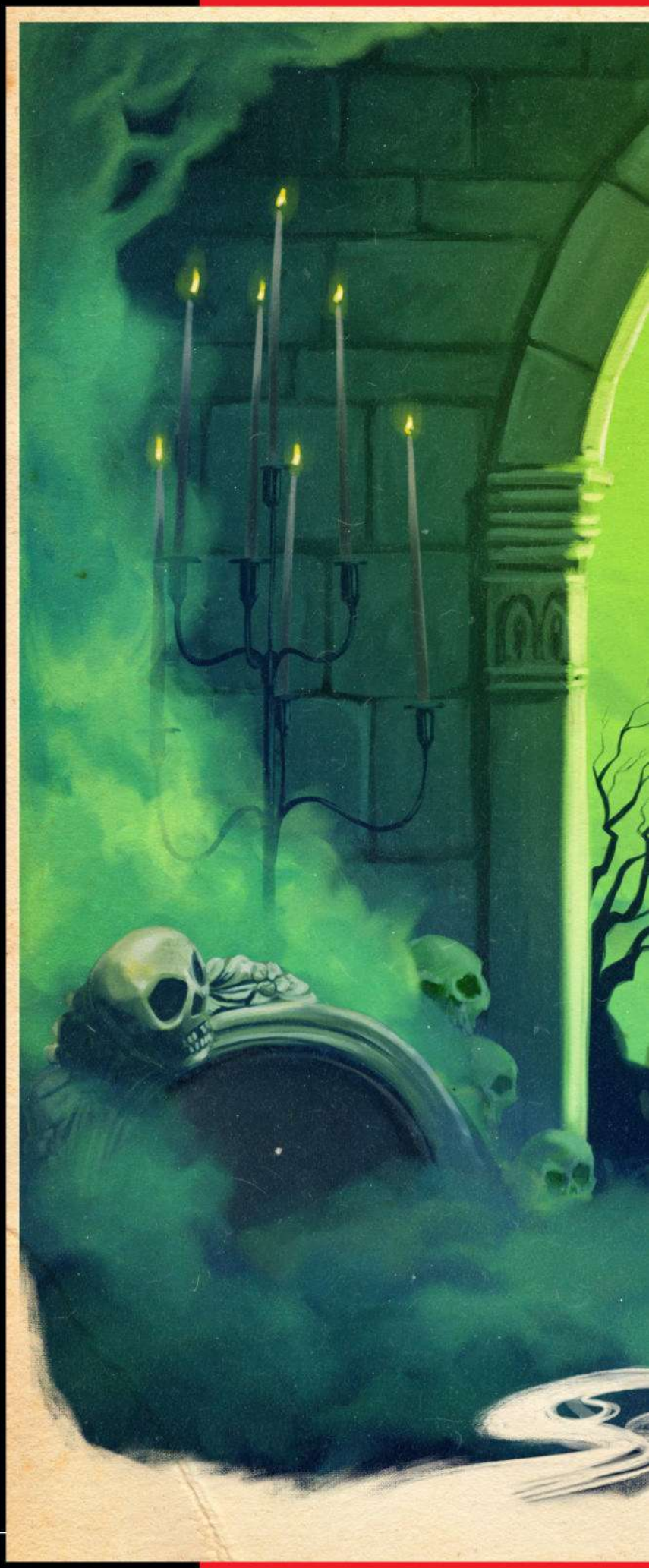
Her face is deathly pale, her wasp-waisted body clad in all black, her eyebrows like bats' wings. As she reaches the end of the corridor she meets our gaze and emits a piercing, bloodcurdling scream — equal parts agony and ecstasy. As the camera jerks forward, seemingly as startled as the viewer, the woman purrs: "Ah! Screaming *relaaaaxes* me so..."

It's 1954 and America has never seen *anything* like this.

The Vampira Show was bottled lightning — a dirt-cheap late-night oddity created to showcase schlocky horror films, that somehow became one of the most influential TV series ever. Aired weekly at midnight, exclusively in the Los Angeles area, the show ran for just one season, between 1954 and 1955. In that time, it made a global superstar of its leading lady — the titular 'Vampira', played by Finnish-American performer Maila Nurmi — who would bookend each week's featured B-movie with a litany of ghoulish sketches and campy double entendres. In a television landscape dominated by cosy, familial programmes like *I Love Lucy* — in which the female characters were typically cheery, demure housewives — *The Vampira Show* represented a genuine shock to the system. It was, as Nurmi's biographer W. Scott Poole put it, "outsider art accidentally gone mainstream".

The series briefly transformed Nurmi into Hollywood's hottest property. She attended glitzy galas, featured in *Life* magazine photoshoots and palled about with the likes of James Dean, Marlon Brando and Elvis Presley. Her show spawned fan clubs across the globe (many of which still exist today) and single-handedly galvanised the role of the 'horror host' — a film and TV trope that has gone on to prop up everything from *The Twilight Zone* to Guillermo del Toro's recent Netflix hit *Cabinet Of Curiosities*. And it all started — as every episode of *The Vampira Show* always did — with that bloodcurdling scream.

Years after screaming that first scream, Nurmi was asked by an interviewer if she could explain the impossibly enduring legacy of such a short-lived, obscure TV show — the footage of ›



ABC-TV
The Red Dress

which is practically all lost today. She laughed, as though the answer were obvious: "Sex and death," she said, with a shrug. "That's a good combination."

Nurmi was born Maila Elizabeth Syrjäniemi in 1922, in Gloucester, Massachusetts. To say that her parents were mismatched would be something of an understatement. Her father, Onni, was a teetotal Finnish immigrant who toured Lutheran churches promoting Prohibition. Her mother, Sophia, was a Massachusetts native and an alcoholic with a penchant for bootlegged wine. "Mama didn't practise what Papa preached," a young Maila wrote in her diary.

The discordant reality of her home life meant that Maila retreated into fantasy from an early age. In 1937, she saw Disney's *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs* at the cinema and became obsessed with the Evil Queen. "She was my escape," she would say later. "She was imperious, in full control, cool. I became the Evil Queen in my mind." She tended towards darkness — and dark humour — from then on. When her father brought home a stray cat, a teenage Maila christened him 'Lucifer'.

On leaving school, her family relocated to Oregon and Nurmi found a job hacking up tuna steaks in one of the state's many fish canneries. But it was hardly an appropriate role for an 'Evil Queen', and she soon convinced her parents to let her stay with relatives in Los Angeles. Once in LA, Maila shortened her tongue-twisting Finnish surname to the more pronounceable Nurmi ("rhymes with 'wormy'", she enjoyed telling people), and dived headfirst into modelling and acting. It was also at this point she began to develop what would become a *Zelig*-like tendency for drifting into the orbit of the era's biggest stars — usually with unhappy consequences.

Hollywood icon Mae West had her dismissed from a 1944 play they were both starring in, ironically dissatisfied with a scene in which Nurmi had to scream ("Does it have to be so *big*?" West complained of Nurmi's shrieking). Director Howard Hawks put Nurmi under contract for a movie a year later, but she was less than pleased with Hawks' suggestion that her teeth needed fixing. "I am not a commodity to be traded or sold to the highest bidder," the unknown wannabe actor told the star-making director of *His Girl Friday*, as she tore up her contract. (That headstrong sense of self-belief would remain with her all her life — ultimately leading to the cancellation of *The Vampira Show*.)

By far her most notable of these early encounters was with Orson Welles. Nurmi had idolised the *Citizen Kane* star for years — hearing his voice on the radio as a teen, she'd leapt from the bathtub to tell her mother she'd be friends with him one day. "He's not your friend," her mother drunkenly retorted. "You work in a fish cannery... And don't you forget it." Ultimately, Nurmi and Welles became more than just friends. After a chance meeting at LA hotspot Musso & Frank, the pair became lovers, and, in her early twenties, Nurmi fell pregnant with a child she claimed was Welles'. The director — who had just married Rita Hayworth — wanted nothing more to do with Nurmi, and the baby was given up for adoption.

"Goodbye to you, Mr Welles. Coward!" Nurmi wrote in her diary soon after the birth. "You are the unabashed Saint of Deceit." All her Hollywood heroes had either rejected or disappointed her — perhaps it was time to start relying on herself. She ended that same diary

Facing page: Publicity shot of Maila Nurmi as Vampira. **Above, top to bottom:** Mixed messages; On brand at an LA Halloween do in 1956; Sipping an exotic brew in 1956. **Right, top to bottom:** With Bela Lugosi in a 1956 episode of *The Red Skelton Show*; *Queen Of The Dead* (1955); Vamping it up.

Alamy, Getty Images, Imago

entry: "To be continued in the event of stardom." Though it would take another decade to arrive, stardom was on the horizon.

The Bel Caribe Masquerade was one of the hottest events in the Hollywood social calendar. Hosted by choreographer Lester Horton (famed for his work on the 1930s *Tarzan* films), the annual ball was a riot of drag, dance and outlandish outfits, and in 1953, Maila Nurmi wangled an invite.

Like many others with a taste for the macabre, she was a fan of Charles Addams' *New Yorker* cartoon strip about a ghoulish old-money clan who became known as 'The Addams Family'. The character that particularly intrigued Nurmi was the matriarch — then-unnamed, but eventually christened Morticia. For the Bel Caribe, she hand-stitched a Morticia-style gothic gown, worn with bare feet and lashings of pale-blue face make-up, to give the appearance of a walking corpse. She bagged not only the grand prize for best costume, but also the attention of a TV producer named Hunt Stromberg Jr.

Stromberg worked for a local LA channel, and he'd recently landed a package of cheapo horror and suspense films with which he was hoping to pad out his late-night schedules. What he needed was a gimmick — something to make these subpar B-movies more palatable to the average viewer — and when he spotted Nurmi's 'undead temptress' get-up, he knew he was onto a winner. Nurmi, who'd spent the past few years rising from a coffin in a Broadway play called *Spook Scandals*, jumped at the chance. She christened her proto-Morticia character 'Vampira' and signed on for Stromberg's show.

Initially titled *Nightmare Attic*, the series debuted on 30 April 1954. The budget was so ›

low that Nurmi was even required to make her own fingernails — cutting three-inch shards from a plastic food container and painting them "haemorrhage red". Sex and death were at the forefront right from the start. Following her first-ever introductory scream, Vampira reclined seductively on her skull-lined sofa, her skirt parting to reveal black fishnet stockings, and offered a piece of advice to any viewers who might be considering suicide: "If at first you don't succeed: die, die, die again."

The effect was instant. It was, Nurmi would later recall, "like a bomb went off". Within a month, ratings were so high that Stromberg renamed the series *The Vampira Show* to reflect its host's skyrocketing popularity. Nurmi received sacks of fan mail from awestruck (and possibly lovestruck) teens, asking for autographs (she sent them 'epitaphs') and the recipe for her signature 'zombie cocktail' (featuring an eyeball instead of an olive). The station was swamped with calls from adults, too — many of them housewives, seeking tips on how to dress up as Vampira. For buttoned-up '50s America, the sight of this powerful, funny, sexy, scary woman was like a shot of pure adrenaline. "There was so much repression," Nurmi later remembered. "People needed to identify with something explosive, outlandish and truthful."

But *The Vampira Show* was more than just subversive titillation. Nurmi's years of stage performance meant she was adept at everything from slapstick to satire to burlesque, and her sketches were wildly odd and inventive as a result. She would banter with off-screen ghosts, bathe with electric eels and act out highly 'meta' spoof commercials that sent up the station's genuine advertisers. One regular segment featured her pet tarantula, Rollo. Her one-liners were watertight, too. Explaining why she only used candlelight, she scoffed: "Everybody knows electricity is just for *chairs*." Years later, Nurmi would describe *The Vampira Show* as "a one-person *Saturday Night Live*".

Above: Turning up the more conventional glamour for the 1955 Emmy Awards. **Top right:** The Vampira-influenced Maleficent, right, in 1959's *Sleeping Beauty*. **Above right:** Here lies our heroine...

By summer 1954, photoshoots in the likes of *Newsweek*, *TV Guide* and *Life* magazine had taken her global. Vampira fan clubs were popping up in Europe and Asia — despite the fact the show wasn't even viewable outside LA. She was nominated for an Emmy, and became a fixture of the Hollywood gossip mags, due in part to her friendships with Marlon Brando and James Dean, members of her raucous after-hours drinking gang 'The Night Watch'. Nurmi and Dean shared a fascination with death — they would trawl cemeteries on late-night "tombstone tours", smoking joints and inventing stories about the deceased. They even sneaked into a mortuary one night to see a genuine dead body — though Nurmi (understandably) baulked when Dean slid a ring off the corpse's finger and slipped it onto his own ("Dead men never tell," he reassured her).

The pair became so close that she invited him to *Vampira Show* recordings, once even strong-arming the star into appearing in a sketch. With his back to the camera, Dean played a bored schoolboy to Vampira's bespectacled librarian. As she recited aloud from the dictionary — "Macabre... madhouse... maim... malady..." — Dean started snoring loudly. "Who's the wise guy?" snapped Vampira, whacking him

Top: Creating a web of intrigue in 1956. **Above right:** The poster for 1957's *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, which Nurmi appeared in — dubbed the "worst film ever" in 1980. **Above:** With Elvis Presley in 1956. **Left:** Lisa Marie as Nurmi in *Ed Wood* (1994).

UNSPEAKABLE HORRORS FROM OUTER SPACE PARALYZE THE LIVING AND RESURRECT THE DEAD!
PLAN 9 FROM OUTER SPACE
with
BELA LUGOSI
VAMPIRA
LYLE TALBOT
A J. Edward Reynolds Production
Produced and Directed by Edward D. Wood, Jr.

with the book. Her audience couldn't know that the 'wise guy' would soon become one of the most iconic film stars of all time.

As 1955 dawned, Vampira was — in Nurmi's words — "everywhere, like horseshit at the turn of the century". But behind the scenes, the wheels were starting to come off. The station was unhappy with their star's very public gallivanting with The Night Watch — it was apparently fine for Vampira to be a headstrong hellraiser, but the same leniency was not extended to the actor who played her. On 9 April, Nurmi decided to skip that week's live recording to make a guest appearance on another show. The channel was furious, and offered her an ultimatum: sign away the rights to the character, or face cancellation. Suspecting their plan was to bring in another — less iron-willed — actress to play Vampira, Nurmi gave them the same answer she'd given Howard Hawks: she was not for sale at any price.

The station called her bluff, and on 16 April the show was pulled off the air. Permanently. Less than a year after her birth, Vampira was dead.

The fall was just as sudden and dramatic as the rise.

As other stations across the US were jumping on the Vampira bandwagon and installing their own local 'horror hosts' — with names like Morgus the Magnificent and Tarantula Ghoul — Nurmi was flat broke, back living with her mother, Sophia. One night, soon after the show's cancellation, Sophia found Nurmi in the bath, screaming and holding a pair of scissors. She'd chopped off most of her hair. When Dean died, in a car crash in September 1955, the gossip mags claimed she had cast an occult 'death spell' on him and she received murder threats from his fans.

Before long, she was reduced to accepting low-paid roles in the kind of schlocky, third-rate pictures she used to mock on *The Vampira Show* — most notably, 1957's *Plan 9 From Outer Space* by famously awful director Ed Wood. Years later, *Plan 9* would help resuscitate Nurmi's fame when it gained the dubious honour of being named 'Worst Film Ever' in the 1980 book *The Golden Turkey Awards*. At the time, though, it felt like "committing professional suicide", she admitted. "But I thought, 'What choice do I have?' Somehow, I seemed to be dead already."

The post-*Vampira Show* '50s weren't *all* doom and gloom — she appeared in a Las Vegas variety show with Liberace (where she met — and bedded — a 21-year-old Elvis Presley), and she even lived out her teenage 'Evil Queen' fantasies when Disney hired her as the live-action reference model for Maleficent, the cackling antagonist of 1959's *Sleeping Beauty*. But by the '60s it was all over: Nurmi was installing linoleum flooring for a living, so poor that Marlon Brando was paying her phone bill (mainly so he could call up and talk about himself).

Her legacy, though, endured, and the 'horror hosts' multiplied. Most significant, perhaps, was Cassandra Peterson's hugely successful '80s creation Elvira, Mistress Of The Dark (Nurmi unsuccessfully sued Peterson for supposedly stealing her likeness). There's even an argument that Nurmi's influence went *far* beyond just horror, directly catalysing the likes of *Beavis And Butt-Head*, *Eurotrash* and Channel 4's *Popworld*. Any programme in which snarky hosts amusingly belittle their own featured content surely contains traces of Nurmi's DNA.

By the time of her death in 2008, Nurmi had rightly become a beloved cult figure — portrayed affectionately by Lisa Marie in Tim Burton's Oscar-winning 1994 biopic *Ed Wood*, and hero-worshipped by horror fans across the globe, including goth-punk groups like Siouxsie And The Banshees and The Misfits. The girl from an Oregon fish cannery had stamped her name on entertainment history — with a piercing scream that lingered somewhere between orgasm and anguish.

Sex and death. That's a good combination.

GO FIGURE

VAMPIRA'S VITAL STATS

50

Episodes of *The Vampira Show* aired between 1954 and 1955.

$59.60

Nurmi's weekly take-home pay on the show. "It all went on taxis and body make-up," she claimed.

2

Songs written about Nurmi by famous punk bands: 1979's 'Plan 9 Channel 7' by The Damned, and 1982's 'Vampira' by The Misfits.

17

Nurmi's waist, in inches, at the height of Vampira's fame. Or so it was said. Her hourglass figure was down to fasting and smothering her torso with papaya powder.

75

Age of Nurmi's son, David, when he discovered his ancestry in 2019. "Imagine being a retired attorney... then one day, [you] find that your birth mother was a famous vampire," he recalled. "It was startling to say the least."

$200

Amount Orson Welles reportedly offered Nurmi's mother, Sophia, when she confronted him about his alleged child with her daughter.

final cut

SPOILER WARNING

A FRESH LOOK AT HOME ENTERTAINMENT

MAY 2025 | EDITED BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

Nightbitch and other animals

WRITER-DIRECTOR **MARIELLE HELLER** ON A CAREER WITHOUT COMPROMISE

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

MARIELLE HELLER IS one of the most interesting American writer-directors around right now. An actor by trade, she's displayed a rare knack for getting cracking, multi-faceted, winning performances from the likes of Bel Powley, Kristen Wiig, Melissa McCarthy, Tom Hanks and Richard E. Grant, in everything from her debut, *The Diary Of A Teenage Girl*, through to the excellent *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* and *A Beautiful Day In The Neighbourhood*. The last three of those stars were nominated for Oscars, a testament to Heller's ability to work with actors. The latest exhibit: Amy Adams' astonishing, fearless turn as a beleaguered, taken-for-granted housewife and mother who turns into a dog, in *Nightbitch*. Although that performance, like the movie itself, was overlooked in the Oscar race. Which is a shame, for *Nightbitch* is a whip-smart movie, a scabrous blend of satire and savage drama that homes in on home truths about motherhood that may have been a little too uncomfortable for most. *Empire* sat down on Zoom with Heller, who is married to fellow director and The Lonely Island member Jorma Taccone, to talk about those home truths, how she shapes her career, and why this is her most personal film yet.

I've read a lot about this movie, and I don't think anyone's asked about the dog you chose to 'be' Amy Adams' character. Why a husky?
It's interesting. I went back and forth about a lot of different dogs. I think there was some part of me that felt like it should be a wolf-like dog, but I wanted there to be this ferocity but also this beauty. I also wanted a domestic dog, and I wanted a husky with red in her hair because of Amy. And it had to be a female dog.

It just feels right.
It's one of those weird decisions you make along the way. You're like, "This feels really important." But who would have ever thought we would spend so long trying to decide what type of dog Amy Adams is?

That's what directing's about, isn't it? A thousand decisions a day. Your gut feeling, instinct.
It's a thousand decisions a day, trying to listen to your own voice, of why you want what you want, and making sure it's for the right reasons, trying to tune into that inner voice and be true to whatever you saw in your head when you imagined the movie.

The opening-scene monologue, delivered by Amy as she's shopping in a supermarket, feels so much like a mission statement for the film.
Well, what's funny about that opening scene was it lived, for the majority of the time in the script and in the editing process, in the middle of the movie. At the very last minute I moved it up to the beginning.

›

Amy Adams channels her inner husky in *Nightbitch*. **Below, left to right:** Director Marielle Heller with her lead actor; 'Mother' (Adams) hangs out with some canine pals.

Alamy, Imago, Sony, Searchlight, Twentieth Century Fox

Why?
I always think about how you introduce an audience to a main character, and that we need the audience — whether our main character is likeable or not, I don't care — to kind of fall in love with them in some way, and see the unique way that they see the world. It felt like it distilled all of her, what made her so fascinating as a character, into this one little monologue. And I thought, "What if we just put that right at the beginning?" It meant disentangling a number of scenes, and cutting things out to do that, but as soon as I put it at the very beginning, it did feel like a very intentional thesis statement. It was sort of like teaching the audience how to watch this movie.

How much of Mother's internal monologues are pulled from the book, and how much are from you?
The one in the grocery store is pulled pretty much word for word from the book. And then all of the situations between her and her husband, or her and her son, are pulled from my life. It was like the book was illuminating this internal monologue and internal reflection on motherhood. But I had a lot of fun filling in the relationship details and the fights and the passive-aggressive ways that we as partners can jab at each other. And I put a lot of nods to my own son and all of his favourite books or songs, or the things we did when he was little, like watching a garbage truck, which is how we spent our mornings, sitting on our front steps in Brooklyn, watching the garbage truck and waving to them. And then adding in this choice at the end to have a second baby, because I was in the process of going through that. "Now I know better, I know how hard it is, and yet I'm doing it again."

There's this really fascinating balance in the movie between having a career and being a mother. As a filmmaker whose husband is also a filmmaker, you must have had conversations about that, about fitting back into the industry after having a child.
I feel like it's almost all I talk about in my life. It sounds pedestrian or mundane, but it's actually a huge part of the work of parenting in the modern age, the logistics and the difficulty of trying to strike a balance, and trying to not feel like you're failing in all areas of your life. You're either failing as a parent, or you're failing in work. I would love to avoid that pitfall, but it's a tricky one, I think, particularly for mothers.

Is there a secret formula?
There's definitely no secret. There's just hard work. If there were a secret, I'd be selling a book about it and making a lot of money.

You could probably write that book, anyway. People would buy it.
People would buy any book that's promising them the secret to happiness within parenthood or work or whatever. The irony is that as a parent you'd buy that book and never even have time to read it.

Above: 2018's *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*. **Right:** Playtime in *Nightbitch*; Heller and Hanks on set of *A Beautiful Day In The Neighbourhood* (2019). **Below right:** *The Diary Of A Teenage Girl* (2015); In 2020 TV drama *The Queen's Gambit*.

The last ten pages could just be blank.
I bought so many sleep books when my son was a baby, and I didn't read any of them. But somehow the act of purchasing the book felt good.

In a way — and I hope this isn't a crass analogy — there's an overlap between filmmaking and motherhood, and it even comes down to that choice to have a second baby, knowing all you know, and likewise the choice to make a second film, a third film, a fourth film, knowing all you know.
I feel like, in this funny way, this movie is about making the invisible labour of motherhood visible. But I also feel like I want to make the invisible labour of being a filmmaker, particularly a female filmmaker, more visible, because it isn't a labour that I feel like people even really understand. It's almost like people think parts of this movie just happened without me, without the labour that I put into it. The performances in the films that I direct are incredible, and I work with incredible actors, and I also put a lot of labour into their performances.

Would you say that's akin to the process you went through on, say, *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* with Melissa McCarthy and

"My job is to make everything more complicated."

Richard E. Grant?
It's how I work with every actor. I probably make the actors a little bit crazy, because I'm more hands on, maybe, than other directors about emotional modulation. But that's because I think as an actor. I'm a 'performance first' type of director. If the performance isn't emotionally resonant, the movie is not going to work. Somebody said to me about *The Diary Of A Teenage Girl* [that] my special effects were Bel's face. I know that my movies all rest on a performance that feels complex and emotionally challenging and moving. I think a lot of people who cast or direct movies cast people they've seen do this type of thing before. I don't find a lot of challenge in that. What's my job, if I'm not there to elevate and make everything more complicated and hopefully more nuanced and interesting? Even Tom Hanks, I think people underestimated how much work it was for him to become Mister Rogers. People just think, "Oh, that was such a perfect fit." The truth is, Tom Hanks, if you met him in real life, there's nothing about him that's Mister Rogers. He's brimming with energy. He's very animated and caffeinated and he's got this quick wit. Mister Rogers was this energetically totally different person, who is wide open, who led with his heart and his vulnerability in this way that is very unlike Tom. So pulling that performance out of him was a joy.

You started out as an actor, and still act. Was moving into directing the logical endpoint?
I think I always knew I would write, but not direct. I became an actor when I was eight years old. I started in children's theatre. I was a little hambone, I was just one of those annoying kids who always wanted to be in front of the school, and was always doing the talent shows, and hamming it up for everybody. But I didn't know, really, that there was any other way to be involved in the arts, other than being an actor. And it wasn't until I was in the real world, going through the life of an actor in the real world, that I was like, "This is not what I expected." I wasn't feeling like, "This is the creative life of my dreams. This is a lot of waiting for other people to have a vision, and then I get to step into their vision." Writing really came out of that frustration, then directing followed. And once I was directing for *Diary*, I really did have this feeling of, "Oh, this is what I'm meant to be doing." It felt very fulfilling. It felt like it was using all of me, all of my skills, and not just a little part of me. I came alive when I started directing. It just felt really natural. And then, after two movies, I went through a bit of a mourning process where I realised the dream I had my whole life, which was to be an actor, I never did it. I had some conversations with my husband about just feeling really sad. I loved my life, but I also felt like I'd had this dream forever and I let it go. And then *The Queen's Gambit* (*in which Heller played lonely housewife Alma Wheatley*) came around as an opportunity not that long after, and he looked at me and was like, "This is exactly what you were talking about. It's here, so you have to do this."

There's a version of that conversation in *Nightbitch*.
You caught that?

Almost verbatim, actually.
Yeah. There were scenes like that, that are not from the book, that are from my life, and when my husband would read the script he would be like, "Are you sure about this? Feels like you're putting our life on screen a little more than I expected."

Do you see a thematic connection between your films?
I guess I see characters who I want to give a voice to, who are maybe not easy to pin down in one sentence. And it has to do with wherever I am in my own life. When I made the movie about Mister Rogers, I had a very little kid and I'd been in that process of, "How do I raise a young man in this world? What is toxic masculinity? How do we combat what kids are learning right now?" It made me think a lot about manhood. And this movie, I was coming out of Covid and trying to process how we're all coping with our own minds and choices. Because I feel like I sort of just woke up and was suddenly a mom of two kids, and was like, "Did I make the right choices in my life? Is this where I am? Why am I where I am? How do I reconcile all of those choices?"

What choices are you making next?
I'm writing. I'm writing projects that I probably see a thematic connection with, but nobody else will. Everything has to be a challenge. Nothing can be easy.

***NIGHTBITCH* IS OUT NOW ON DISNEY+**

THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

From Here To Eternity

FRED ZINNEMANN'S RICH, ROMANTIC WORLD WAR II EPIC

WORDS **CHRISTINA NEWLAND**

YOU KNOW THE scene, even if you don't know the film: a black-and-white image of a man and woman entangled on a Hawaiian beach, passionately kissing as the waves wash over them and a swell of lush, romantic, orchestral music rises to a crescendo. The man is Burt Lancaster as the athletic and powerful Sgt Warden; Deborah Kerr is Karen Holmes, Warden's senior officer's unhappy wife. Their adulterous affair plays out, sensual and full of yearning, against the backdrop of a military base where tragedy lies in wait. It's a scene that raised pulses at the time, and remains one of the most famous images in movie history. But there's much more to *From Here To Eternity* than romance and rolling around in the surf.

In 1953, a little over a decade after the events of the Japanese surprise attack at Pearl Harbor, Hollywood decided to tackle the "date which will live in infamy" — sensitive subject matter given the relative recency of the tragic events, where over 2,000 soldiers and civilians were killed. Adapted from a bestselling novel of the same name by James Jones, himself a veteran whose book closely followed his real experiences, the film is not simply a patriotic recounting of the events which led America into the Second World War. It easily could have been. But the man who made it a psychologically complex romantic drama, who took an interest in granular everyday military life before the explosive attack, was director Fred Zinnemann. *From Here To Eternity* was never going to be a pedestrian war picture.

Zinnemann was a veteran Hollywood filmmaker who had, in the previous year, directed the controversial Western-as-political-allegory *High Noon* — now recognised as one of the finest Westerns ever made. His left-wing credentials meant that his approach to Pearl Harbor would actively avoid jingoism or pat, broad-brush attitudes; instead he depicts a tropical military base far from the American mainland, teeming with sweaty, restless men waiting for orders, sexually frustrated and sometimes on the verge of petty violence. They play power games and bully each other for their perceived differences; they fight and smoke and laugh; they seek distraction with local wives and mistresses, sometimes, as with Montgomery Clift and Burt Lancaster's characters, becoming hopelessly entangled. Life in this balmy, purgatorial so-called paradise is full of psychodrama long before the attack occurs; in fact, by the time it happens (very late in the film's running time), you almost forget its inevitability.

Given the film's Academy Award success — 13 nominations and eight of them winners — it's hardly controversial to say that the performances are remarkable. Burt Lancaster, who had always been an imposing physical presence but was here given the opportunity to grapple with real psychological complexity, plays a thoroughly decent man who finds his loneliness has led him down a path he hates himself for; Frank Sinatra gives an unforgettably touching supporting performance as skinny, wisecracking fellow soldier Maggio, a man ultimately doomed for his individualism. Sinatra lobbied for the role and was right to do so: he won Best Supporting Actor at the Oscars, and the movie's release aligned with an upturn in his musical career. And when the rest of the ensemble cast includes a lovelorn Deborah Kerr, a bullying Ernest Borgnine, and a sexually provocative Donna Reed (playing thoroughly against her usual 'good girl' type), it's hard to find a weak spot anywhere.

But it's Montgomery Clift's oddly tender performance as a hard-headed military man with a nonconformist streak that is perhaps the most beautiful of all. His Pte Robert E. Lee Prewitt, or 'Prew' as he's sometimes called, is an army bugler and a former boxer. Prewitt has a tough time right from the start. He refuses to put his pugilistic skills to use in the army boxing club for enigmatic reasons; his stubbornness immediately earns the resentment of his peers and the punishing attention of his superior officer. And no matter what humiliation or unfairness Prewitt is subjected to, he refuses to give in, earning him the respect of his fellows,

Main: Lovers Warden (Burt Lancaster) and Karen (Deborah Kerr). **Below, top to bottom:** Frank Sinatra as Maggio; Trouble in paradise; Bugler Prewitt (Montgomery Clift).

Focus Features, HBO, Imago, MPTV

most especially his pal Maggio. Zinnemann later said that he was most moved by the idea of an individual whose spirit cannot be broken against the cogs of machinery; Prewitt exemplifies that spirit. Clift, one of the finest Method actors of his generation, had a delicate look that belied an internal steeliness. His dark-haired, angular good looks hardly suggest a prizefighter, giving him a sensitivity and unexpected vulnerability in a setting usually reserved for the most macho and uncomplicated of types.

Zinnemann had directed Clift in the actor's 1948 debut feature, *The Search*; one which also featured him as a young and sensitive soldier facing the enormity of the Second World War's horror, albeit in a very different situation. Zinnemann himself was an Austrian Jew who had emigrated to the USA, and, after the war, tragically learned both his parents had been murdered by the Nazis. His depth of feeling for the difficulty even the so-called toughest men faced in these dire wartime circumstances is clear, and the fact he chose Clift more than once to embody that is no accident. In one of the most heartbreaking and memorable scenes of *From Here To Eternity*, Clift's Prewitt plays 'Taps' on the bugle for a dead friend and fellow soldier. That friend has not been lost for a noble cause but to the senseless violence and domination of his own compatriots. As Clift plays his haunting song, tears silently streaming down his face, his barracks listen in shame and mourning. It's a moment of reckoning and of grief for all the war dead, be they victims of the enemy or otherwise. Tragedy haunts the steps of *From Here To Eternity* long before the Japanese bombers fly overhead.

***FROM HERE TO ETERNITY* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY **CHRIS HEWITT**

1 THE PENGUIN

(OUT 17 MARCH, DVD/BR)

Colin Farrell deservedly won an Emmy for his incredibly layered turn as the Batman villain who swaps his soul for social climbing in Gotham. Never mind the (astonishing) prosthetics — feel the pathos as Farrell and showrunner Lauren LeFranc manipulate you into rooting for a monster.

2 YOJIMBO & SANJURO

(OUT 17 MARCH, BR)

You can never go wrong with an Akira Kurosawa/Toshirô Mifune double bill, and the BFI have duly obliged with this pair of wonderful samurai flicks. *Yojimbo*, in which Mifune plays two warring factions like a harp, is the best-known and most influential, but the lighter, more playful *Sanjuro* is an utter delight.

3 WICKED

(OUT NOW, DVD/BR/4K/DIGITAL)

Do you really like it? Is it, is it *Wicked*? You did, which is why Jon M. Chu's adaptation of the Broadway hit made over $700 million at the box office, and it is. That two-and-a-half-hour runtime never feels like a chore, as you're zipped along on a barrage of excellent tunes.

4 THE BROOD

(OUT 31 MARCH, 4K BR)

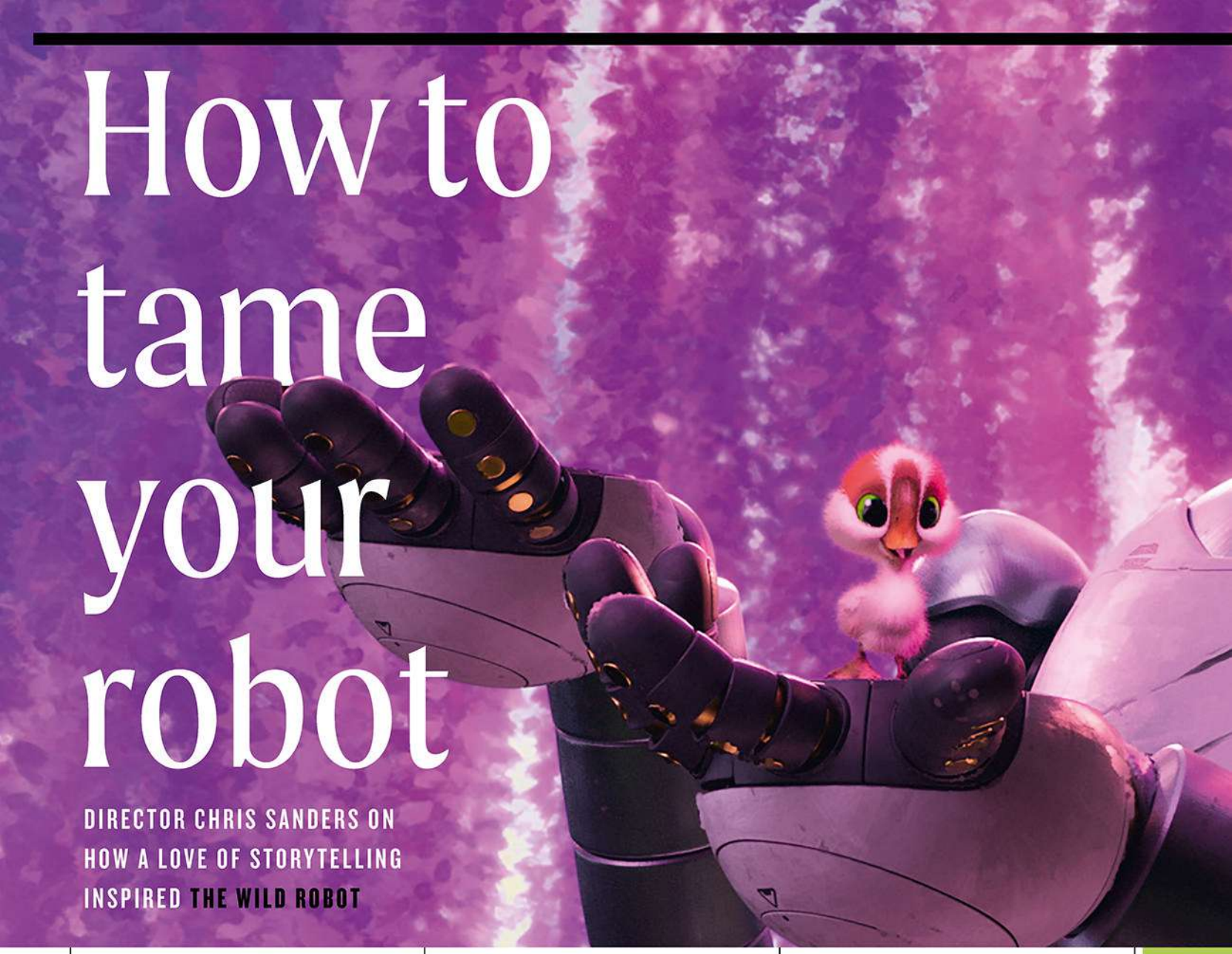
One of David Cronenberg's weirder earlier efforts, this sci-fi shocker about a horde of homicidal, psychically controlled killer kids veers close to Garth Marenghi territory. But the excellent performances, Cronenberg's sure command of tone and psycho-sexual subtext save the day.

5 CONCLAVE

(31 MARCH, 4K BR)

Edward Berger's sumptuous thriller, deservedly one of the big players at this year's Oscars, sees Ralph Fiennes open a Vatican of worms while trying to select a new Pope. Glorious stuff.

How to tame your robot



DIRECTOR CHRIS SANDERS ON HOW A LOVE OF STORYTELLING INSPIRED THE WILD ROBOT

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

AT ONE POINT in Chris Sanders' extraordinary animated film *The Wild Robot*, Roz — the robot of the title, stranded on an island inhabited only by animals, who finds herself inadvertently becoming a mother to a young goose called Brightbill — is seen struggling with the concept of storytelling. Perplexed, she asks a simple question: "How will fictional narrative help Brightbill?"

It's a good question. And one to which Sanders can relate. Because the 62-year-old has quietly become one of the giants of modern American animation via the likes of the Disney trifecta of *Beauty And The Beast*, *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*, on which he has story credits; and his directorial efforts, including *Lilo & Stitch*, *How To Train Your Dragon* and now *The Wild Robot*, which became something of a sleeper hit at the box office last year ($328 million worldwide), and a strong contender at the Oscars. So yes, fictional narrative has helped Chris Sanders.

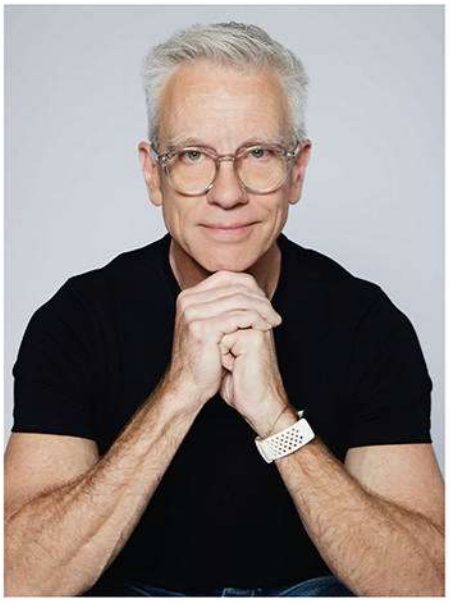
"Ever since I was a kid, I was building narratives constantly in my head," Sanders tells *Empire*. "And when I came to Disney and started doing story, it just felt good. It felt like something I naturally did." But he had never done it by himself. *Lilo & Stitch* and *How To Train Your Dragon* were co-written with Dean DeBlois (who also co-directed the latter), while *The Croods* was written with Kirk DeMicco and John Cleese. So when he was offered the chance to adapt Peter Brown's book on his lonesome, he just did what came naturally.

"I'm a gardener," he says. "I love to jump in and just feel my way through something so that it feels right. I took a lot of characters out because I wanted the core relationship to have enough time and space to resonate. But you've also got to discipline yourself, to get the structure right before you allow yourself the fun of decorating it."

The result of all that pruning was one of the most original and emotional animated films in a while, as Sanders artfully sketches that relationship, between Roz (voiced by Lupita Nyong'o) and Brightbill (Kit Connor), while along the way deftly touching on big themes like parenthood, bucking against authority, free will, companionship, death, growth and, yes, storytelling. It was exactly what he needed upon returning to animation after a brief detour into live-action with *The Call Of The Wild*. "It's not unusual for we in animation to be enamoured of the speed at which a live-action film is made. You can make maybe two live-action films for every one animated film you get done," says Sanders of that experience. "I felt comfortable doing *The Call Of The Wild*. It was the most amazing experience. I learned so much every single day. You know, I had anxiety every day — are we going to make the day? But it was the interactivity with the actors that was a revelation to me."

Still, *The Call Of The Wild* did not do well at the box office, and wounds were being licked when Sanders visited DreamWorks Animation one day soon after. "I wanted to get busy, and dropped in to see what was in development," he says. "They laid projects on a table in front of me, some scripts, some books, and when they got to *The Wild Robot* and described it, I was like, 'That's the one I want to read.'" He read it, and saw an opportunity to make a movie that contained everything he loved about animation, everything that had made him want to get into the business in the first place, working on the likes of *Muppet Babies* in the 1980s. He wanted to make a movie that felt handmade.

Right: Director Chris Sanders. **Here:** Robot Roz (Lupita Nyong'o) has a gander at gosling Brightbill (Kit Connor). **Below:** Scenes from the odd-couple adventure, plus voice stars in the studio.



"I started way back, when everybody was drawing with pencils, and every background was hand-painted," he says. "There's an analogue warmth that comes from that that there's never going to be a substitute for. When CG arrived, we were obligated to depart from a lot of things, and that hand-done thing, we left it behind. We received so many amazing gifts, not least of which was the ability to move a camera in space. But with *The Wild Robot*, technology had finally reached the point where we could now have hand-painted characters and a hand-painted environment."

The film's embrace of that artisinal aesthetic, combining it with CGI for an utterly unique look, was also made possible by the leaps that animation has made as a genre over the last few years, with directors and studios taking bigger risks with how their films look and feel. You could call it 'the *Spider-Verse* Effect'. "When *Spider-Verse* landed, it was like an explosion," says Sanders. "It just blew everybody's mind. It was the most freeing, thrilling thing that I'd seen in animation for decades, really. CG eventually came to the point where things were beginning to homogenise. So *The Wild Robot* was just so fortunate. I came along to find this book waiting for me, and the studio had been developing this amazing visual language and the technology to make it. It was the right book in the right place at the right time."

There's another pretty major influence running through *The Wild Robot*: the films of Studio Ghibli, whose capacious imagination and boundless heart can be felt in almost every frame of Sanders' movie. When Sanders learned that the film had been nominated for Best Animated Feature at the Oscars, he was in Japan at the time. Quite a thing to be told you're being nominated for an animated movie while you're in the country of Hayao Miyazaki. "Oh my gosh, I never even thought about that," laughs Sanders. "That's amazing. I think no-one in animation wouldn't say he was their number one inspiration. Very, very personal stories that are both disciplined and yet feel unscripted." You could even say Miyazaki's fictional narrative helped Sanders.

***THE WILD ROBOT* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY, 4K AND DIGITAL**

The Ranking

Tony Scott movies

EMPIRE'S ART IS RANKING, AND IT'S ABOUT TO PAINT ITS MASTERPIECE

RUSSELL MOORCROFT

Marco Vittur

OUR CRITICS

CHRIS HEWITT
His ego is sending PayPal requests his body can't cash.

NICK DE SEMLYEN
Was once beaten up by the inventor of Scrabble.

HELEN O'HARA
You got her in a vendetta kind of mood.

JAMES DYER
Thinks *Enemy Of The State* tops *The Conversation*.

Chris: Slap on your orange filters, folks, because we are going to be discussing the movies of Tony Scott. I'm a big fan. Tony Scott spells "cinema" to me.

Nick: You know you're gonna get explosions, you're gonna get cars flipping up in the air—

Chris: And that's just *The Hunger*.

Nick: You know you're gonna get dialogue scenes shot for no apparent reason from a helicopter. But he's under-appreciated.

Chris: He is. I don't want to turn this into a Ridley versus Tony thing, but they're such an interesting study in contrasts. Their styles were so different, their approaches were so different. But I think he was every bit Ridley's equal, and his impact on action cinema is as great as any director of the last 30 to 40 years.

Helen: I agree with the last part. I don't necessarily agree with the rest. I enjoy a lot of Tony Scott films. It would be fair to call him a maximalist.

Nick: He was my gateway, really, into action cinema. That '90s stretch of *True Romance* and *Crimson Tide*, he was on godly form.

James: There's a part of me that acknowledges that not all of his films are great, but I love a lot of them despite that. He had a visual verve that a lot of filmmakers can only dream of having. I rewatched *Man On Fire* for this, and the camera is just fucking everywhere.

Chris: He had this capacity for reinvention throughout his career. He was beginning to experiment with that style in *Enemy Of The State* and *Spy Game*. The latter was a flop, and he went away and licked his wounds, and decided that 'more' was the answer.

Nick: He and Ridley started in ads. And *The Hunger*, especially, feels like an hour-and-a-half perfume advert, with all the billowing curtains. Then he put that style into *Top Gun*.

James: He feels more at home with stuff like *Top Gun*. He was very much about sensory assault with his filmmaking.

Nick: It got a lot of flak at the time for being pro-military propaganda, and there's definitely a case to be made. It's like, "War is cool."

Helen: He had an eye for talent, and it doesn't come much bigger than launching Tom Cruise.

Nick: At school, one of us would sit on a chair being rocked while the soundtrack was playing, to simulate being in *Top Gun*. I don't know why I revealed that.

Chris: He then reteamed with Simpson and Bruckheimer to make *Beverly Hills Cop II*.

James: It's a masterpiece compared to most of the *Beverly Hills Cop* films. But it's not a patch on the original.

Nick: As a Tony Scott action film, it's glorious to look at. It's slick, and cool. But it's not what a *Beverly Hills Cop* film should be. It gets the character wrong. I'm really torn on it.

Chris: Two Tony Scott films were released in 1990. *Days Of Thunder* and *Revenge*, which is what most people desire after they see it. They want to take revenge.

Helen: It's very nasty.

Nick: It's pretty grim. It was his first attempt at a film noir, but it's quite extreme and unpleasant. But he did have all the top male movie stars of that period wanting to work with him. Cruise, Bruce Willis, Kevin Costner. He made them all look really good.

Chris: Did Costner look as cool as Cruise does in *Days Of Thunder*, which has the best, most ridiculous entrance of any character in a Tony Scott movie, riding around the corner on a motorbike with the wind blowing through his hair?

Nick: And then he says, "I'm Cole Trickle," and ruins it. It's like saying, "I'm Brian Droopy."

Chris: It's basically *Top Gun* with cars.

James: And it's not as good as that.

Nick: It's bad, but it's watchable. Tony Scott films are always watchable, no matter how all over the place they might be.

Chris: A nice segue into *The Last Boy Scout*.

Nick: Does it have Tony Scott's greatest opening scene? It's so nasty and weird and amazingly shot. It's the darkest advert you've ever seen, and I'm not sure what it's advertising.

Chris: Death and mayhem. I love everything about this movie. It's got a great Shane Black script, great repartee between Bruce Willis and Damon Wayans.

Helen: I have affection for this film, but not to the degree you guys do.

Chris: It absolutely tanked.

And again he went away, licked his wounds, and there was a screenplay floating around Hollywood, by a young up-and-comer called Quentin Tarantino, that everybody wanted to direct. Tony won the race, and *True Romance* was born.

Helen: Scott made *True Romance* linear. The script wasn't linear.

Chris: You shock me.

Helen: And it didn't have the happy ending.

Nick: I'm glad it came out the way it did, because there's some Tony Scott magic to this film. That cast is incredible.

Chris: I think most people think of this as a Tarantino film more than they would think of it as a Tony Scott film, but he brings so much to this. The performances are great.

Nick: That Hopper-Walken scene, which is probably something you couldn't have in a film nowadays, is terrific.

Chris: But it's arguably the best scene in Tony Scott's filmography. The lighting in that is great.

Nick: It feels operatic.

Chris: *Crimson Tide* is next, and I might as well say it right now, this is my number one.

James: I think there's a strong argument for saying it is his best.

Nick: It grabs me. Very few films grab me like that. The war of wills between Denzel Washington and Gene Hackman is so watchable.

Chris: It's an acting masterclass. Two of the greatest actors of all time, going at each other for two hours in a really tense, claustrophobic Cold War thriller. It's great.

Helen: It's a good film. I just don't love it in the way I love *The Hunt For Red October*.

James: You're not The Fan.

Chris: That's such a strange film. There's a good film inside *The Fan*, waiting to get out, and it never quite does.

Nick: It's the film *The King Of Comedy* could have been.

Helen: It doesn't feel alive in the way his best films did.

Chris: He got his mojo back two years later for *Enemy Of The State*, though.

Nick: It's a great match of theme to style. It's about surveillance, and paranoia—

Chris: Who told you that?

Nick: And his camera is all over the place. It's got a sense of fun and eccentricity to it. There's a major subplot in which the bad guys take Will Smith's blender. The blender has a bigger role than his wife.

Helen: It's a really interesting film. It's very obviously sceptical of the surveillance state, and at the same time makes it look superfun to be into surveillance.

Chris: It has the exact same ending as *True Romance*, where a bunch of different factions blunder into each other, there's a Mexican stand-off, and Tom Sizemore shows up for some reason.

Nick: He had so much energy. *Man On Fire*, *Domino*, *Déjà Vu* were all done back-to-back, and each of those is so hyper-kinetic you would think a 20-year-old was directing them.

Helen: What I like about *Man On Fire* is that it takes its time to build that relationship between Denzel Washington and Dakota Fanning.

James: A literal hour.

Helen: It needs that.

Nick: I like the build-up more. When Dakota Fanning leaves the film, and it's Denzel walking away from explosions, it loses a bit of its magic.

Chris: *Domino* and *Déjà Vu* are fine.

Nick: I have a lot of time for the *Déjà Vu* car-chase scene that takes place in the present day and four days in the past simultaneously. It's just bonkers.

Chris: But his final double whammy of *The Taking Of Pelham 123* and *Unstoppable*, I will go to bat for. *Pelham* isn't as good as the original, of course, but again, Denzel's such good value, and it's a great New York movie. But *Unstoppable* I was really impressed by when I rewatched it for this.

Nick: He's doing everything practically, pretty much. I haven't got any time for *Pelham 123*, to be honest. They mess up one of cinema's great endings. But *Unstoppable* is really entertaining.

Chris: Right, enough squabbling. Let's vote!

AGREE? DISAGREE?

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THE TOP TEN

1.
TRUE ROMANCE (1993)

2.
CRIMSON TIDE (1995)

3.
TOP GUN (1986)

4.
THE LAST BOY SCOUT (1991)

5.
MAN ON FIRE (2004)

6.
ENEMY OF THE STATE (1998)

7.
UNSTOPPABLE (2010)

8.
BEVERLY HILLS COP II (1987)

9.
THE HUNGER (1983)

10.
THE TAKING OF PELHAM 123 (2009)

SPOILER SPECIAL

Back In Action

DIRECTOR SETH GORDON ON HIS STARRY NETFLIX ACTIONER

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

SETH GORDON'S *Back In Action* has a multi-layered title. On the one hand, it's about superspy couple Matt and Emily (Jamie Foxx and Cameron Diaz) returning to the field after faking their own deaths to raise a family. On the other, it sees the return of Diaz to acting after a decade away, and it also applies to Foxx, who famously became seriously ill during the film's shoot, with production resuming only after he made a long and gruelling recovery. The film itself is a knockabout action comedy which trades heavily on the charm and charisma of its duo, orchestrated by seasoned comedy veteran Gordon. Here, he tells *Empire* about the film's key moments.

A TURBULENT BEGINNING

Back In Action starts with a major action sequence, as ace spies Matt (Foxx) and Emily (Diaz) are attacked on a plane, just after finding out they're about to have a baby. But that wasn't Plan A. "It used to be a train, and that information came out as they were escaping the bad guys," says Gordon. "Then somebody up on high read the script late in the game and said, 'No trains.' Literally two weeks before we were going to start shooting, it was like, 'Come up with something else!'" Luckily, Gordon had had a plane sequence in mind for another project. "I just stole it from myself, dialled it into these characters and this premise, and it went from an ambitious train sequence to an insanely ambitious plane sequence."

HANDS-ON PARENTING

Fast forward 15 years, and Matt and Emily are happily married, with two kids. But their secret life implodes when they go to a nightclub to retrieve their rebellious underage daughter Alice (McKenna Roberts), and wind up kicking the crap out of a bunch of guys. "Initially it was the same kind of concept, but at an outdoor music festival," says Gordon. "[The club is] ultimately a better place." This sequence is part of the production schedule that was delayed after Foxx got ill, and Gordon says that hiatus improved things. "The fight they got in was [originally] with people out in the parking lot, but it made sense that the very people the daughter is secretly hanging out with are the ones they would end up in conflict with."

CHEKHOV'S DIET COKE & MENTOS

Recently, we've seen a number of variations on Chekhov's Law, namely the notion proffered by the Russian playwright that every element and detail in a narrative must have significance. Gordon's version of that is to introduce Diet Coke and Mentos, a famously combustible combination that pays off in a car chase when Matt and Emily are trying to evade a hit squad. "My son loved

those videos online of people doing Diet Coke explosions," explains Gordon. "It was just a matter of finding the venue, and setting it up without being way too obvious that that was coming." Gordon discovered something interesting in his research. "It's only Diet Coke that works," he says. "Not Coke Zero, not Sprite. Only Diet Coke has that insane reaction to Mentos." We'll tell the lab.

PUTTING THE 'F' IN 'FAMILY'

"There were two options, and that was my favourite," says Gordon of the scene where the film's only F-bomb (hello, 12 rating) is dropped. "We weren't trying to kill anyone!" says Foxx's Matt to their kids after a particularly gnarly getaway. "If we were, they'd be so fucking dead right now," replies Emily. The other option was in the plane at the beginning, "but we ended up spending our F-bomb in the car, so the kids could appreciate it." Gordon considers this scene, in which Matt and Emily finally come clean about their blood-soaked history, to be the film's most pivotal. "Every line has to pay the bills, in terms of the comedy and story. That's why I wanted it in an environment we could completely control."

INTRODUCING GLENN CLOSE

Roughly halfway through comes more star power, as Glenn Close shows up as Emily's estranged mother Ginny, a former "MI6 girlboss legend" who turns out to have a few tricks up her sleeve. "She's based on my mother-in-law, actually," laughs Gordon. "Not so much the MI6 background, but the history of unspoken pain between people and how that needs to be confronted. That's the part that Glenn really hooked into. Their conflict in the kitchen, where they really laid into each other, was one of the first scenes we shot, and I was a little nervous starting with that. But it was actually healthy doing that so early."

TÊTE-À-TATE

The film's climax sees Matt and Emily race from London's Tate Modern to the Thames Barrier via boat and bike, in an attempt to thwart the plans of CIA turncoat Chuck (Kyle Chandler). "For a long time I thought the Barrier was a great target," says Gordon. "So it was reverse engineering. What's the right place to start a chase from that would end there?" The production actually got permission to shoot inside the Tate, which blew Gordon's mind. "Architecture is my degree, and I spent a lot of time studying the Tate. Every time I would come to London, I would visit. It's extraordinary."

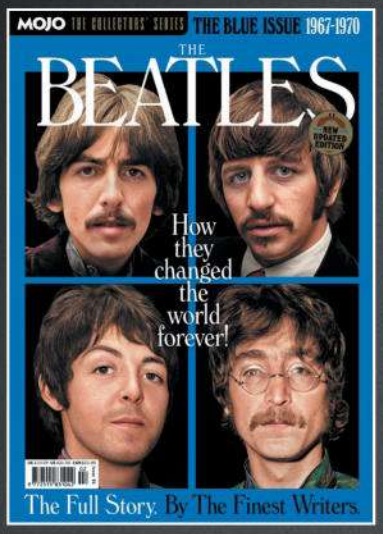
NIGEL SAVES THE DAY

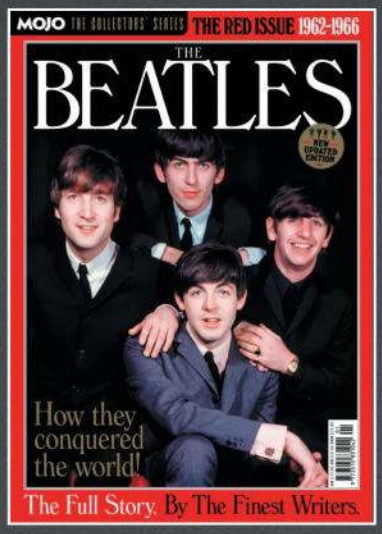
Unusually, it actually falls to hapless wannabe spy (and Glenn Close's lover) Nigel to save the day by closing the Thames Barrier in time to save London from being deluged. That Nigel is given such a big moment is testament to Jamie Demetriou, for whom Gordon wrote the role. "Nigel wasn't in the film at all, actually, until we were in prep in London, and I had this last-minute notion that it would be great to have one more character involved," reveals Gordon. "Jamie and I connected, and I basically was trying to create as many moments for Nigel as possible. It's an homage to Argyle from *Die Hard*. I love that thing where the guy who seems sort of useless is able to save the day."

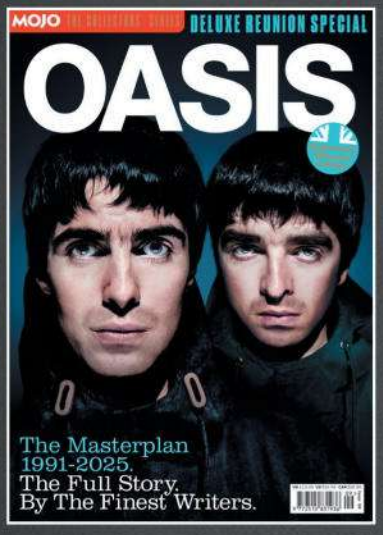
BACK IN ACTION... AGAIN?

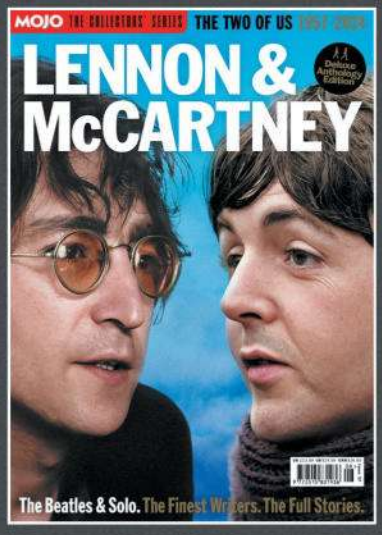
The film ends with a not-so-subtle hint at a sequel, as British spy Baron (Andrew Scott), who's hopelessly in love with Emily, pops up and says that a problem has come up that requires the assistance of Emily's heretofore unmentioned dad. Does Gordon know who he would want as Emily's dad? "Yes, but I haven't asked, so I don't know if they're available, but it's got to be somebody that you believe holding a gun." Pierce Brosnan, clear your schedule.

***BACK IN ACTION* IS ON NETFLIX NOW**









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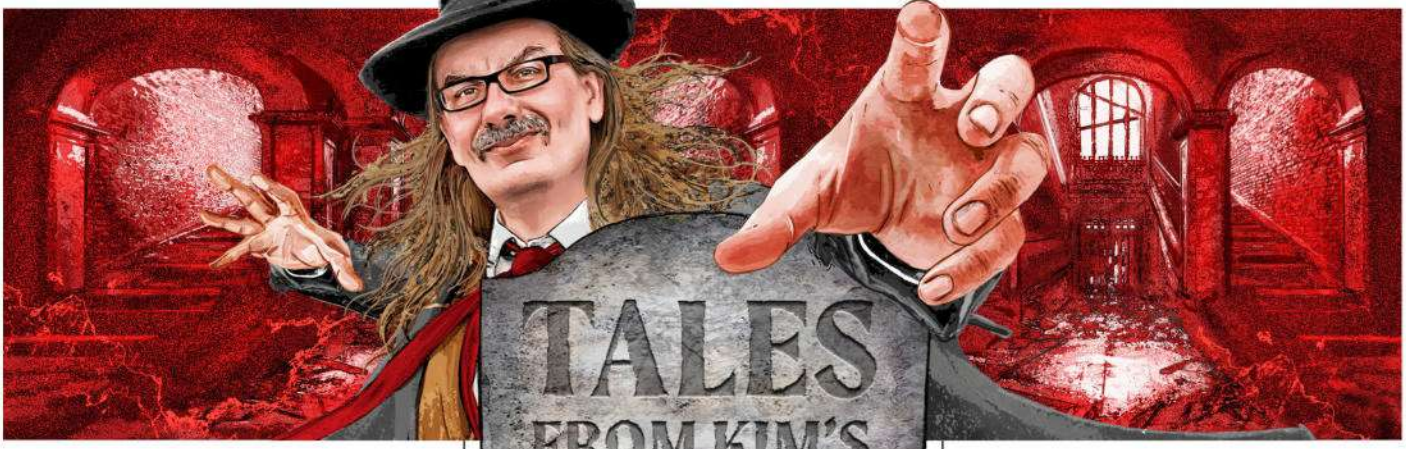


TALES FROM KIM'S CRYPT

LEGENDARY AUTHOR AND CRITIC KIM NEWMAN BRINGS US HIS UNIQUE TAKES ON CULT CINEMA

MATTHEW BRAZIER

THIS MONTH

THE *CREEP* FRANCHISE

PATRICK BRICE'S *CREEP* (2014) — recently a sumptuous special-edition Blu-ray from Second Sight — is the foundation stone of a mini-franchise which extends to *Creep 2* (nestled deep in the Netflix algorithm), and a six-episode continuation, *The Creep Tapes* — new on Shudder. It's one of relatively few horror franchises to come out of the streaming era, landing on Netflix back when subscribers weren't spoiled for choice and deceptive enough to spring shocks on viewers who clicked on it at random. Made as the 'found footage' boom initiated by *The Blair Witch Project* and prolonged by *Paranormal Activity* was wearing thin, *Creep* spins a simple twist on the premise — a monster who, unlike Bigfoot or your average witch of the woods, wants to be filmed — and wavers unsettlingly between indie uncomfortable-relationship comedy (think *Chuck & Buck*) and trapped-with-a-murderous-stalker horror.

In *Creep*, videographer Aaron (Brice) is hired to drive way out into the wilderness to record a testament from terminally ill but chipper Josef (Mark Duplass), to be passed on to his unborn child. Josef cites midlist Michael Keaton film *My Life* as inspiration but over a long, enervating day and night he delivers something closer to *Misery*. Mild-mannered, just-go-along-with-it-for-the-cash-at-the-end-of-the-day Aaron is subjected to repeated jump-scares. Duplass finds a signature role in Josef (if that's his name), who is always on camera and in your face with unwanted intimacies which are excruciating but kind of pathetic. It's a remarkable balancing act. Even when Josef puts on a werewolf mask and adopts the alternate personality of 'Peachfuzz', an aggressively friendly monster, you get why Aaron doesn't just skedaddle.

Brice and Duplass began *Creep* as a quirky comedy — a mumblecore *Planes, Trains And Automobiles* — which would have ended with two lonely souls hugging on a bench. Preview screenings and input from Blumhouse supremo Jason Blum persuaded them to go darker. A strength of the film is that it retains glimpses of happier possibilities while ruthlessly setting Aaron (and us) up for 'Chekhov's axe', seen early in the film and wielded nastily in a punchline. It's a challenge to follow up a film which answers its big question, but *Creep 2* rings interesting changes as Josef, now calling himself Aaron, is challenged by his next target, vlogger Sara (Desiree Akhavan), and possibly tries to mend his ways. Can a sociopath have a real relationship, and hasn't social media brought a whole range of possibly dangerous misfits out into the open?

The minisodes of *The Creep Tapes* feature six-ish fresh potential victims. Duplass takes the Creep — the nearest we get to learning his real name is that his mother calls him 'Wolfie' — to new places, ranging from quixotically sadistic to near-vigilante as he records an acting-school audition tape, strings along a 'Gotcha!' videopodcaster, bothers a bird-watcher, fansquees a true-crime-documentary auteur and engages in a psychic struggle with Peachfuzz itself. You sense the Creep's cupboard — seen at the end of the first film — could offer a lot more.

Top to bottom: The original *Creep* (2014); Things get hairy in *The Creep Tapes*.

Blumhouse Productions, Shudder

CRYPT KEEPERS

KIM'S PICK OF THE WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

AMFAD: ALL MY FRIENDS ARE DEAD

(DIGITAL)

Most contemporary slasher movies feature either influencers who deserve to get hacked to bits or an Airbnb kitted out as a torture chamber. Marcus Dunstan's *AMFAD* is both — and also a serial-killer picture. Watchable but defiantly shallow on top of proudly derivative.

BARBER

(DIGITAL)

Gay Dublin private eye Aidan Gillen searches for a missing girl during the pandemic. Fintan Connolly's Guinness noir has a regulation plot, but Gillen puts a nice spin on the classic shabby detective. One of very few (so far) films to highlight rather than ignore weirdness circa 2020.

DARK WINDS: SEASON 2

(BLU-RAY)

Season 2 of the Tony Hillerman-derived series finds Navajo cop Zahn McClarnon (outstanding) investigating a sinister cult. A great 1970s-set Western, solid mystery thriller and unsettling borderline horror story in six fat-free episodes with an actual ending.

THE LAST VIDEO STORE

(LIMITED-EDITION BLU-RAY)

A fun retro-schlock homage set in a basement full of VHS cassettes. One tape, the 'Videonomicon', opens portals to bad movies, so reality is invaded by the alien bug of *Preystalker*, the killer from slasher *Beaver Lake Massacre* and a martial artist from *Fury Of The Viper*.

VOICE OF SHADOWS

(DIGITAL)

Artist Corrinne Mica inherits an old mansion from her sinister aunt on the condition her boyfriend (Guillermo Blanco) doesn't live there. The couple move in anyway, and omens presage possessions and stabbings. Twisty, atmospheric if sometimes awkward horror.

STORY OF THE SHOT

Blue Velvet

THE INSIDE TRACK ON DAVID LYNCH'S MOST TERRIFYING SCENE

WORDS **ALEX GODFREY**

THE ORIGIN

Blue Velvet lifts the lid on suburbia, revealing all of the underlying unpleasantness. And there is nobody in the film as unpleasant as Dennis Hopper's psychotic, abusive, gas-glugging bastard, Frank Booth. Around 40 minutes in, Frank arrives at Dorothy Vallens' (Isabella Rossellini) apartment, demands bourbon, calls himself 'Daddy', huffs a load of gas, and then calls himself 'Baby' while sexually assaulting her. He forbids Dorothy from looking at him, and punches her for doing so; that, explained Lynch, is because Frank doesn't want to see his reflection in her eyes, to "come face to face with sickness".

Hopper loved the role, calling Lynch before the shoot to tell him, "I *am* Frank Booth": as the actor later explained, he related to the character as he was "coming out of a drug-culture where one was exposed to a lot of criminals and a lot of dealers and a lot of borderline-psychotic people." When Rossellini asked Lynch what Hopper was like, he said, "It's like sitting next to a ticking bomb."

THE SHOOT

Blue Velvet began filming in August 1985, at the EUE/Screen Gems studio in Wilmington, North Carolina, and this would be the first scene for both Hopper and Rossellini. "Otherwise," Lynch told Rossellini, "we'll always be worrying about it." As written, the gas Frank chugs on to put himself in an altered state was helium, but on set, Hopper had other ideas. "I said, 'Helium doesn't make you crazy and derange your senses; it just makes you sound like Daffy Duck,'" the actor later recalled. Lynch had chosen helium to provide a contrast between Frank's 'Daddy' and 'Baby' personas, but went with Hopper's, erm, learned experience. Hopper continued to Lynch: "Let me think of it as amyl nitrate, or nitric oxide. Let me show you what it would look like. I can do this sense memory.'" Lynch loved it. "It was very good that I had an expert who knew," he later laughed.

Alamy, Imago, Paramount

INSTANT TRIVIA

- Lynch considered Willem Dafoe and Harry Dean Stanton before finally casting Hopper.
- Rossellini suggested Dorothy look "like a doll", creating a façade to hide her abused reality behind.
- Lynch was so hands-on, he arranged clumps of dust under Dorothy's radiator — even though we'd never even see them.
- Frank's foul-mouthed tirade ("You fucker's fucker! You fucker!" etc) was enhanced by Hopper because, said Lynch, the actor was "on a roll".

THE LEGACY

Lynch was delighted with Hopper's performance. "He just nailed it," he later said. "Dennis was Frank from the first second, all the way through." Hopper was nominated for a Golden Globe; the film shot his career into more popular territory. Frank — and this scene particularly — were unforgettable, but the most disconcerting cultural riff happened a few months after its release, when Hopper hosted *Saturday Night Live* in May 1987. Performing a skit in character, Hopper's Frank hosted a gameshow called 'Frank Booth's *What's That Smell?*', in which he shouted at contestants to identify what turned out to be lethal odours from different gases, and attacked them. The result is possibly more uncomfortable than the actual film.

***BLUE VELVET* IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL**

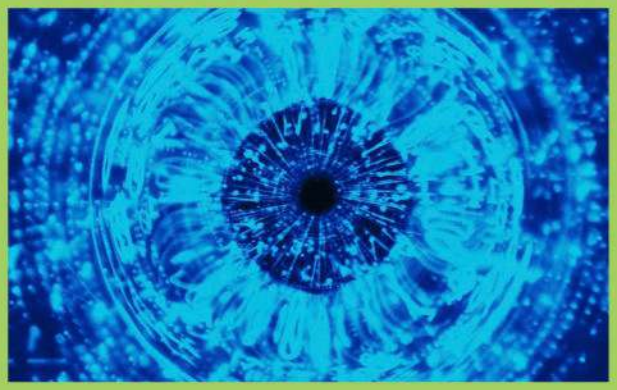
Main: Suck it up, man! Dennis Hopper gets hold of the good stuff. **Right:** Edgar Wright.

SPECIAL THANKS TO...

EDGAR WRIGHT

MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE — DEAD RECKONING DIRECTOR CHRISTOPHER McQUARRIE ON HOW WRIGHT ENHANCED THE ENTITY

Special Thanks to the UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
The Producers Wish to Thank the Following:
SINCEREST THANKS TO OUR FAMILIES, FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES FOR YOUR UNWAVERING SUPPORT THROUGH THE MAKING OF THIS FILM.



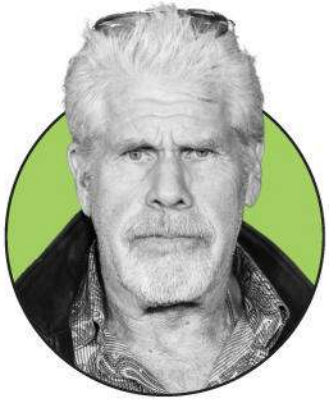
EDGAR WRIGHT IS not the Entity. But he helped shape it. When Christopher McQuarrie was deep in the woods on the edit of *Mission: Impossible — Dead Reckoning*, he invited a group of chums to look at the movie in various stages of assembly and give feedback. One of those chums was Wright, who made a note after seeing a near-complete cut. "Edgar said, 'Could there be some sort of a sound or musical cue that tells us it's the Entity?'" recalls McQuarrie.

The Entity, for those of you not in the IMF, is the AI villain at the heart of *Dead Reckoning*, the target of Ethan Hunt's hunt, and appears only on video and computer screens as a constantly pulsing soundwave. The McQuandary for McQuarrie was that the Entity already had a musical theme, courtesy of composer Lorne Balfe. "I said, 'Come on, you gotta be kidding me,'" laughs McQuarrie. "There's a musical cue that's all over the movie." After much thought, though, McQuarrie realised that Wright was, well, right. "We were alluding to the Entity, but we had never simply said, 'Entity here'," he says. His solution? To approach supervising sound editor James Mather, with a brief to give the Entity a distinctive identity. Mather's solution was immediate. "He goes over to his computer and calls up this weird sound," says McQuarrie. "He goes, 'My Sonos soundbar was on the fritz, and I just recorded it.'"

That became the model for the Entity's signature sound effect — a combination of human voices, music and bespoke sound design that is at once sinister and suitably sci-fi. "That was a gamechanger," admits McQuarrie. "That emanated from Edgar's note." And more than earned Wright's place in the Special Thanks section of the *Dead Reckoning* credits. Mission: accomplished. **CHRIS HEWITT**

Time Capsule

Ron Perlman



THE FORMER HELLBOY ON ONE HELL OF A CAREER

WORDS **CHRIS HEWITT**

RON PERLMAN HAS something to declare. "You know, it's funny," he tells *Empire*. "If you send me to the store with a list of things you need for me to get, I'll show up two weeks later and say, 'Sorry, I got lost.' But in this business of acting, I remember everything." That's something we're about to put to the test as we take Perlman, the grizzly character actor who's made such a memorable impact in a multitude of movies (often working with Guillermo del Toro) over the last 40-odd years, down memory lane ahead of the release of his latest, Jack Huston's directorial debut, *Day Of The Fight*. And, true to his word, he delivers.

SECONDS OUT
DAY OF THE FIGHT (2025)

"I've not seen this particular image before. I'd like to do a screenshot of it. (*He does so*) This is a beautiful film, something I'm really proud to have participated in, watching a friend of mine, Jack Huston, emerge as a writer and filmmaker. I only worked on it for three days. If there was anything written out for me to say to Mikey [Michael Pitt] during the fight, maybe it was a line or two. It's pretty much all improvised. We shot the whole fight sequence in a day-and-a-half. I think Scorsese had eight weeks to just do the fight stuff on *Raging Bull*."

AN EYE FOR A NOSE
CRONOS (1993)

"This was the first movie Guillermo [del Toro] ever made, and was my introduction to him. With Guillermo, you get these really weird personality idiosyncrasies that he's thought up. This whole thing with [my character] Angel's vanity, and his obsession with his nose, it had nothing to do with the narrative. But there was a nuance to it, and a humanity to it that enriched the piece to the point where you realise, 'This is a filmmaker who's setting himself apart.' Every moment I spent on *Cronos*, I realised, 'I think God has dropped me in the middle of the most fortuitous place one can be.' (***Empire:*** *"Would you have liked this nose?"*) Oh yeah, I'm not a big fan of the way I look, so anything would be an improvement. (***Empire:*** *"Your nose is superb."*) Thank you. I'll stop worrying!"

STOCKS AWAY
HELLBOY (2004)

"I was in real stocks here. I was chained to the floor, on my knees, for six or seven hours at a time to shoot this sequence. A lot of the filmmakers I work with have a theory that the more uncomfortable you can make an actor in playing an uncomfortable moment, the more authenticity you're going to arrive at. So I understood why Guillermo put me in that situation, but it was very uncomfortable and compromising, physically. And we still love each other. But it was a difficult day."

Alamy, Icon Film Distribution, Imago

THREE POINTS, WEAVER
ALIEN RESURRECTION (1997)

"Sigourney [Weaver] had been practising this shot for two months before we actually filmed this scene. And she never made the shot once. This is take one of the day we're filming, and you can see it's a wide shot. She takes the ball, she dribbles it twice, she walks four steps, that puts her back at 35 feet [from the net]. She throws it over her head, keeps walking, and the thing went in. Not just in, but nothing but net. And I freaked out. She took it in her stride. She said, 'Yeah, well, this is why I've been practising for two months. I don't make it during the rehearsals. I wait for the camera to be rolling, motherfucker.'"

MEET BRUTE
BEAUTY AND THE BEAST (1987-1990)

"This is, I think, the end of a season of *Beauty And The Beast*. [My character Vincent has] never been in her house. [Catherine, played by Linda Hamilton] and I have met, on her balcony outside her apartment, and I think I'm coming in here to do her harm because I've been drugged. I remember that we had a 23-hour shoot, because it was the last day of the season, and we had to finish that night. So we started at eight o'clock in the morning and finished at seven o'clock the following morning. That's just the shooting time. It was four hours to put on the make-up and one hour to take it off."

WATER WAY TO GO
THE CITY OF LOST CHILDREN (1995)

"In this movie, I had this father-daughter thing with an eight-year-old girl. Here, she and I are tied up, and being threatened to be drowned. I think she's already underwater at this moment, which is why I'm screaming. The whole movie was filmed in a warehouse 30 miles south of Paris, including the river. (***Empire:*** *"The water looks bright green. Was it safe?"*) We have an organisation here in America called OSHA, which makes sure people don't get exposed to poisonous things. Turns out they don't have that in France! So I kept asking a lot of questions like, 'Is it safe?' And they would turn around and go back to eating their sandwich, and the question never got answered. But the reason why I still piss green is probably because of this sequence."

LAUGH IT UP
DRIVE (2011)

"What this shot is, is the POV of Ryan Gosling, in that mask he wears, looking in on me, getting ready to follow me and precipitate my demise. And this is [director] Nicolas Winding Refn saying to me, 'You're with this woman, and you're having drinks, and she's just said something that's so absurd that it rocks your world, and you're laughing uncontrollably.' Had nothing to do with the movie, but these are the kind of things you remember. I was like, 'Is this a big enough laugh?' He goes, 'No, I need it bigger.' To this day, I don't know why. But it was delightful."

LANGUAGE BARRIER
THE NAME OF THE ROSE (1986)

"That's a young Christian Slater with a middle-aged hunchback, yours truly, on the right. This was a game-changer for me. It got a lot of people's attention and led to a lot of other wonderful stuff. I was charged by [director] Jean-Jacques Annaud with an assignment that was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before and since. [My character] Salvatore speaks a mumbo-jumbo of languages; he uses words from seven languages in his pastiche of communication. The book had been translated into 170 different languages and I got a copy in the seven languages he spoke, and created sentences that had a word from each. It was pretty trippy."

DAY OF THE FIGHT **IS OUT NOW ON DIGITAL, AND ON 7 APRIL ON DVD AND BLU-RAY**

The Ultimate Empire Quiz

EVERY MONTH, WE WILL TEST YOUR MOVIE KNOWLEDGE. ARE YOU READY?

THIS MONTH

JULIA ROBERTS

1 She made her big-screen debut in a film starring Justine Bateman as the lead singer in a rock band. What is the name of that film?

2 How many Academy Award nominations has she received? a) two b) three c) four

3 She won the Oscar for Best Actress, of course, for her role as Erin Brockovich in the movie of the same name. Who directed it?

4 How many times has she been directed by that man, including *Erin Brockovich*?

5 What is the name of her character in *Pretty Woman*?

6 When Hugh Grant's Will inadvertently interviews Roberts' Anna in *Notting Hill*, what magazine does he claim to work for?

7 What is 'the Mexican' in the Gore Verbinski movie of the same name?

8 In 1996, Roberts guest-starred in an episode of which popular US sitcom?

9 1996 was also The Year Of The Irish Accent for Roberts, as Mary Reilly in the Stephen Frears film of the same name, and which other movie?

10 In which film does Roberts utter the line, "I need to take you to the church so you can marry the man of our dreams"?

11 She cameoed as herself in Robert Altman's *The Player*, in 1992. What is the name of the film-within-a-film in which she appears?

12 Speaking of cameos, Roberts was nominated for a Primetime Emmy for her guest spot in a ninth-season episode of *Law & Order*. What is the name of that episode? (Before you cry foul, here's a clue: it's a title we can fully endorse...)

13 Complete the chain of movies in which Roberts appears with George Clooney: *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), *Confessions Of A Dangerous Mind* (2002), *Ocean's Twelve* (2004), *Money Monster* (2016), and…?

14 Roberts sings the classic song 'All My Life' in which 1996 musical?

15 The tagline for which Roberts movie was, "Catch her if you can"?

16 Which former *The Day Today* alum wrote the play (and subsequently adapted the screenplay) on which *Closer* (2004) was based?

17 Roberts has only appeared in one movie — *Blood Red*, shot in 1986 but released in 1989 — with her famous actor brother. Who is he?

18 Equally, she's only starred in one movie — a 2010 romantic comedy — with her niece, Emma Roberts, although the two of them don't share a scene. What is the name of that comedy?

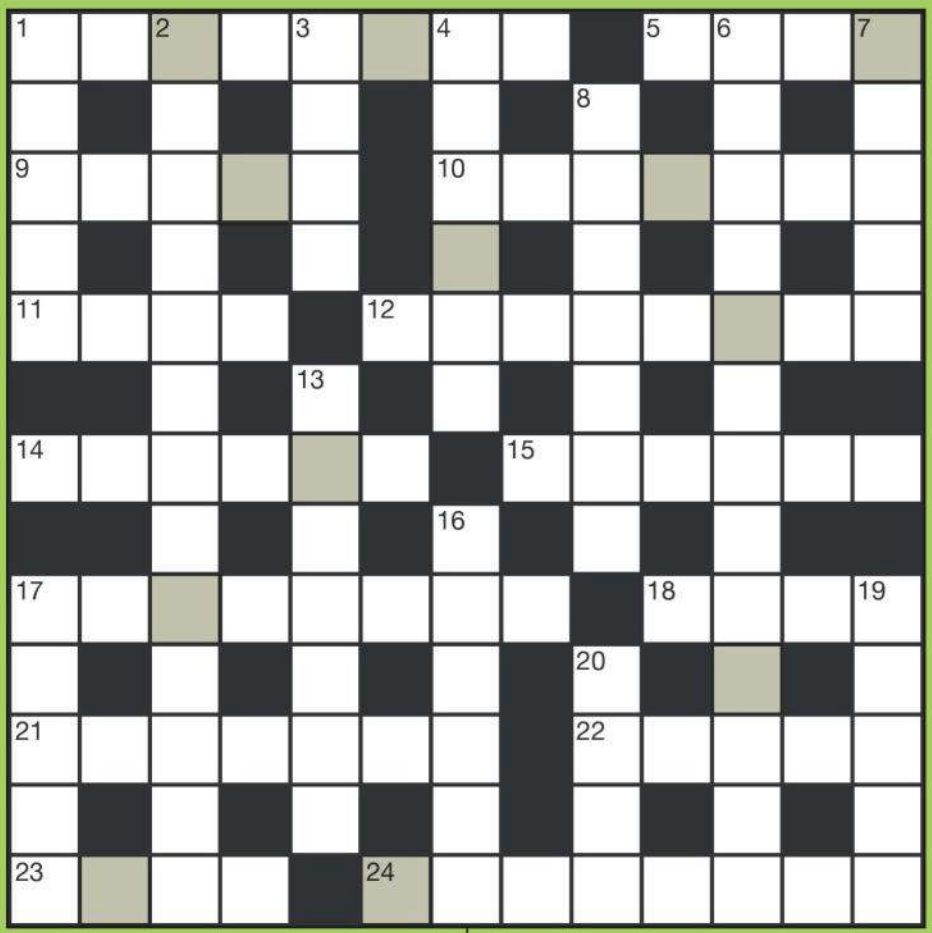
19 With a worldwide take of $463 million, what is Roberts' highest-grossing movie to date?

20 In which 1993 movie does she play a character called Darby Shaw?

ANSWERS 1. *Satisfaction* (1988) **2.** c) Four — *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *August: Osage County* (2013) **3.** Steven Soderbergh **4.** Four — *Erin Brockovich*, *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), *Full Frontal* (2002) and *Ocean's Twelve* (2004) **5.** Vivian Ward **6.** *Horse & Hound* **7.** An antique gun **8.** *Friends*, in an episode called 'The One After The Superbowl' **9.** *Michael Collins* **10.** *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) **11.** 'Habeas Corpus' **12.** 'Empire' (yep) **13.** *Ticket To Paradise* (2022) **14.** *Everyone Says I Love You* **15.** *Runaway Bride* (2000) **16.** Patrick Marber, aka Peter O'Hanrahan-hanrahan **17.** Eric Roberts **18.** *Valentine's Day* **19.** *Pretty Woman* **20.** *The Pelican Brief*

Imago

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

1 Kevin Smith movie with John Goodman and Melissa Leo (3,5)
5 One of these menaced Michael Caine in an Oliver Stone movie (4)
9/17 Across Filmmaker behind *Rain Man*, *The Alto Knights* and **3 Down** (5,8)
10 Annual festival in New York co-founded by Robert De Niro (7)
11 His surname is Offerman (4)
12 Huston, from *Prizzi's Honor* and *The Addams Family* (8)
14 The boss of John Gielgud's Hobson (6)
15 Paul, who I was in a 1980s British comedy (6)
17 See **9 Across**
18 This could be the Poseidon or Argo (4)
21 It's where Adam Sandler's the singer (7)
22 Alias used by Wanda Maximoff's neighbour (5)
23 *Slap* — (Paul Newman film) (4)
24 Eddie, who's the Jackal or a Newt (8)

DOWN

1 Williams, who starred in **3 Down** (5)
2 Pre-streaming alternative to a regular cinema release (6-2-5)
3 In which Michael Gambon makes drones instead of products for kids (4)
4 Film for which Julia Ducournau won the Palme d'Or (6)
6 Andrea Arnold road movie with Sasha Lane and Shia LaBeouf (8,5)
7 Royal biopic starring Naomi Watts as the tragic princess (5)
8 A Martin Scorsese film or what Clarice Starling wants (7)
13 This name links Mysterio, Cletus Kasady's prison and *Grindhouse* (7)
16 — *Nights* (Paul Thomas Anderson movie) (6)
17 Could by Jerry, could be Juliette (5)
19 Mario Van Peebles Western from 1993 (5)
20 It's either dead or with horses (4)

COMPETITION

WIN!

CRITERION TITLES ON 4K UHD

MORE GEMS FROM the Criterion Collection this month. Newly out, first we have the transgressive *Performance*, starring Rolling Stone Mick Jagger. A collaboration between directors Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg, it's a bohemian fantasy trip that proved hugely influential. Also just released is Gus Van Sant's ethereal second feature, *Drugstore Cowboy*. Starring then-über-heartthrob Matt Dillon, it cemented Van Sant's reputation as a poet of outsiderhood. And finally, *Godzilla Vs. Biollante* (out 24 March). The second film of the Godzilla franchise's 1980s resurgence, it showcased the towering beast for a new generation. We've got copies of all three on 4K UHD for three winners. To enter, simply crack the crossword, solve the anagram and follow the instructions below.

ALL AVAILABLE TO BUY ON CRITERION COLLECTION 4K UHD

COMPETITION ENDS 7 APRIL

HOW TO ENTER Take the letters from each coloured square and rearrange them to form the name of an actor, director or character. Visit www.empireonline.com/crossword and fill out the form, along with your answer, in the provided field. Entry is free and closes at midnight on 7 April. Winners are selected at random. See below for terms and conditions.

APRIL'S ANSWERS ACROSS: **1** Searchlight, **9** Dream, **10** Aldrich, **11** Talented, **12** Khan, **14** Shaft, **16** Glass, **20** Wild, **21** Waterboy, **24** Fade out, **25** In The, **26** Ryan Coogler. DOWN: **2** Ewell, **3** Romanoff, **4** Heaven, **5** Indy, **6** Heights, **7** Edith, **8** Thing, **13** Sleeping, **15** Holiday, **17** Swift, **18** Tattoo, **19** Myles, **22** Bette, **23** Moon. **ANAGRAM:** ETHAN HUNT

TERMS AND CONDITIONS: One entry per person. Entries are free. Entries must be received before 8 April or will not be valid. The Competition is only open to people aged 18 and over who live in the United Kingdom and are not a Bauer employee or their immediate family. Three winners will be selected at random from all valid entries. Competition promoted by H Bauer Publishing t/a Empire ("Empire"). Empire's choice of winners is final, and no correspondence will be entered into in this regard. The winners will be notified, via email, between seven and ten days after the competition ends. Empire will email the winners a maximum of three times. If a winner does not respond to the message within 14 days of the competition's end, Empire will select another winner at random and the original winner will not win a prize. Empire is not responsible for late delivery or unsatisfactory quality of the prize. Entrants agree to the collection of their personal data in accordance with Empire's privacy policy: http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/. Winner's personal details will be given to prize provider to arrange delivery of the prize. Bauer reserves the right to amend or cancel these terms or any aspect of the competition (including the prize) at any time if required for reasons beyond its control. Any questions, please email empire@bauermedia.co.uk. Complaints will not be considered if made more than 30 days after the competition ends. Winner's details available on request (after the competition ends) by emailing empire@bauermedia.co.uk. For full T&Cs see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html

CLASSIC SCENE

"YOU'RE GOING TO BE ALRIGHT"

Mrs. Doubtfire

CHOSEN BY
CHRISTOPHER ABBOTT
(ACTOR)

CHRISTOPHER ABBOTT: "As much of a film-nerd guy as I am, *Mrs. Doubtfire* was a movie I watched a lot as a kid, and is one of the best movies about divorce. There's an insane amount of great scenes. The end, where he picks [the children] up, is one of the more beautiful. That movie holds such a place in my heart."

INT. MIRANDA'S HOUSE (HALL) — DAY

The new babysitter has arrived to pick up Miranda's children, Lydia (Lisa Jakub), Christopher (Matthew Lawrence) and Natalie (Mara Wilson). After losing access to their dad Daniel, after his stint disguising himself as a fake nanny called Mrs. Doubtfire, they are unenthused by the prospect. But when Miranda opens the door, they are stunned to see it's Daniel.

NATALIE: Daddy?

DANIEL: Hi.

LYDIA: What's going on?

DANIEL: I'm here to pick you up.

MIRANDA: Your dad's going to take you for a few hours, every day after school.

NATALIE: Really?

LYDIA: What about the courts? All that legal stuff?

DANIEL: Ask your mom.

MIRANDA: I took care of it. No more supervised visits. No more court liaison.

MARA: Just us?

DANIEL: Just us.

She runs to hug him. He laughs.

DANIEL: Go get Mr Bear. Go get your stuff. Hurry up.

LYDIA: Alright.

They run off, leaving Daniel and Miranda.

MIRANDA: Would you like to come in?

DANIEL: No, I'll wait outside.

MIRANDA: Okay.

DANIEL: Thank you. (*Pause*) I'll see you.

He turns and leaves. Miranda closes the door. We hear a familiar voice on the TV. It's Daniel as Mrs. Doubtfire, now the host of a kids' TV show, reading a letter. Miranda walks into the living room to watch.

MRS. DOUBTFIRE: "Dear Mrs. Doubtfire, two months ago, my mom and dad decided to separate. Now they live in different houses. My brother Andrew says that we aren't a real family anymore. Is this true? Did I lose my family? Is there anything I could do to get my parents back together? Sincerely, Katie McCormick."

As Miranda watches Mrs. Doubtfire — Daniel — talk about a situation so close to their own, the camera slowly pushes in on her.

MRS. DOUBTFIRE: Oh, my dear Katie. You know, some parents when they're angry, they get along much better when they don't live together. They don't fight all the time and they can become better people, and much better mommies and daddies for you. And sometimes they get back together. And sometimes they don't, dear.

We now see Mrs. Doubtfire on the television.

MRS. DOUBTFIRE: And if they don't, don't blame yourself. Just because they don't love each other anymore, doesn't mean that they don't love you.

We now see Daniel outside Miranda's house, as the kids come out to leave with him. Mrs. Doubtfire continues to talk.

MRS. DOUBTFIRE: And there are all sorts of different families, Katie. Some families have one mommy, some families have one daddy, or two families. And some children live with their uncle or aunt, some live with their grandparents, or some children live with foster parents. And some live in separate homes in separate neighbourhoods, in different areas of the country, and they may not see each other for days, weeks, months, or even years at a time.

Now we go back to the television.

MRS. DOUBTFIRE: But if there's love, dear, those are the ties that bind. And you'll have a family in your heart forever.

Miranda smiles. We see Daniel drive off with the kids as Mrs. Doubtfire continues.

MRS. DOUBTFIRE: All my love to you, poppet. You're going to be alright. Bye-bye.

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